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ABINGTON ABBEY

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

THE HOUSE OF MERRILEES
EXTON MANOR
THE ELDEST SON
THE SQUIRE'S DAUGHTER
THE HONOUR OF THE CLINTONS
THE GREATEST OF THESE
THE OLD ORDER CHANGETH
WATERMEADS
UPSIDONIA
ABINGTON ABBEY
THE GRAFTONS
RICHARD BALDOCK
THE CLINTONS AND OTHERS

ABINGTON ABBEY

A NOVEL

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BY

ARCHIBALD MARSHALL



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TO

MY DEAR LITTLE ELIZABETH

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ABINGTON ABBEY

CHAPTER I

THE VERY HOUSE

"I BELIEVE I've got the very house, Cara."

"Have you, darling? It's the fifty-third."

"Ah, but you wait till you see. Abington Abbey. What do you think of that for a name? Just come into the market. There are cloisters, and a chapel. Stew ponds. A yew walk. Three thousand acres, and a good head of game. More can be had by arrangement, and we'll arrange it. Presentation to living. We'll make Bunting a parson, and present him to it. Oh, it's the very thing. I haven't told you half. Come and have a look at it."

George Grafton spread out papers and photographs on a table. His daughter, Caroline, roused herself from her book and her easy chair in front of the fire to come and look at them. He put his arm around her slim waist and gave her a kiss, which she returned with a smile. "Darling old George," she said, settling his tie more to her liking, "I sometimes wish you weren't quite so young. You let yourself in for so many disappointments."

George Grafton did look rather younger than his fifty years, in spite of his grey hair. He had a fresh complexion and a pair of dark, amused, alert eyes.

His figure was that of a young man, and his daughter had only settled his tie out of affection, for it and the rest of his clothes were perfect, with that perfection which comes from Bond Street and Savile Row, the expenditure of considerable sums of money, and exact knowledge and taste in such matters. He was, in fact, as agreeable to the eye as any man of his age could be, unless you were to demand evidences of unusual intellectual power, which he hadn't got, and did very well without.

As for his eldest daughter Caroline, her appeal to the eye needed no qualification whatever, for she had, in addition to her attractions of feature and colouring, that adorable gift of youth, which, in the case of some fortunate beings, seems to emanate grace. It was so with her. At the age of twenty there might have been some doubt as to whether she could be called beautiful or only very pretty, and the doubt would not be resolved for some few years to come. She had delicate, regular features, sweet eyes, a kind smiling mouth, a peach-like soft-tinted skin, nut-coloured hair with a wave in it, a slender column of a neck, with deliciously modulated curves of breast and shoulders. She looked thoroughbred, was fine at the extremities, clean-boned and long in the flank, and moved with natural grace and freedom. Half of these qualities belonged to her youth, which was so living and palpitating in her as to be a quality of beauty in itself.

She was charmingly dressed, and her clothes, like her father's, meant money, as well as perfect taste; or

perhaps, rather, taste perfectly aware of the needs and fashions of the moment. They were both of them people of the sort whom wealth adorns, who are physically perfected and mentally expanded by it: whom it is a pleasure to think of as rich. The room in which we first meet them gave the same sense of satisfaction as their clothes and general air of prosperity, and expressed them in the same way. It was a large room, half library, half morning-room. There was a dark carpet, deep chairs and sofas covered with bright chintzes, many books, pictures, flowers, some ornaments of beauty and value, but few that were not also for use, all the expensive accessories of the mechanism of life in silver, tortoise-shell, morocco. It was as quiet and homelike as if it had been in the heart of the country, though it was actually in the heart of London. A great fire of logs leapt and glowed in the open hearth, the numerous electric globes were reduced in their main effect to a warm glow, though they gave their light just at the points at which it was wanted. It was a delightful room for ease of mind and ease of body—or for family life, which was a state of being enjoyed and appreciated by the fortunate family which inhabited it.

There were five of them, without counting the Dragon, who yet counted for a great deal. George Grafton was a banker, by inheritance and to some extent by acquirement. His business cares sat lightly on him, and interfered in no way with his pleasures. But he liked his work, as he liked most of the things

that he did, and was clever at it. He spent a good many days in the year shooting and playing golf, and went away for long holidays, generally with his family. But his enjoyments were enhanced by not being made the business of his life, and his business was almost an enjoyment in itself. It was certainly an interest, and one that he would not have been without.

He had married young, and his wife had died at the birth of his only son, fifteen years before. He had missed her greatly, which had prevented him from marrying again when his children were all small; and now they were grown up, or growing up, their companionship was enough for him. But he still missed her, and her memory was kept alive among his children, only the eldest of whom, however, had any clear recollection of her.

Beatrix, the second girl, was eighteen, Barbara, the third, sixteen. Young George, commonly known as Bunting in this family of nicknames, was fourteen. He was now enjoying himself excessively at Eton, would presently enjoy himself equally at Cambridge, and in due time would be introduced to his life work at the bank, under circumstances which would enable him to enjoy himself just as much as ever, and with hardly less time at his disposal than the fortunate young men among his contemporaries whose opportunities for so doing came from wealth inherited and not acquired. Or if he chose to take up a profession, which in his case could only be that of arms, he might do so, with his

future comfort assured, the only difference being that he could not expect to be quite so rich.

This is business on the higher scale as it is understood and for the most part practised in England, that country where life is more than money, and money, although it is a large factor in gaining prizes sought for, is not the only one. It may be necessary to 'go right through the mill' for those who have to make their own way entirely, though it is difficult to see how the purposes of high finance can be better served by some one who knows how to sweep out an office floor than by some one who has left that duty to a charwoman. The mysteries of a copying-press are not beyond the power of a person of ordinary intelligence to learn in a few minutes, and sticking stamps on letters is an art which has been mastered by most people in early youth. If it has not, it may be safely left to subordinates. George Grafton was as well dressed as any man in London, but he had probably never brushed or folded his own clothes. Nor had he served behind the counter of his own bank, nor often filled up with his own hand the numerous documents which he so effectively signed.

It is to be supposed that the pure mechanism of business, which is not, after all, more difficult to master than the mechanism of Latin prose, is not the only thing sought to be learnt in this vaunted going through of the mill. But it is doubtful whether the young Englishman who is introduced for the first time into a family business at the age of twenty-two or three, and has had the ordinary experience of public school

and university life, is not at least as capable of judging and dealing with men as his less fortunate fellow who has spent his youth and early manhood doing the work of a clerk. His opportunities, at least, have been wider of knowing them, and he has had his training in obedience and discipline, and, if he has made use of his opportunities, in responsibility. At any rate, many of the old-established firms of world-wide reputation in the City of London are directed by men who have had the ordinary education of the English leisured classes, and may be said to belong to the leisured classes themselves, inasmuch as their work is not allowed to absorb all their energies, and they live much the same lives as their neighbours who are not engaged in business. George Grafton was one of them, and Bunting would be another when his time came.

The Dragon was Miss Waterhouse, who had come to the house in Cadogan Place to teach Caroline fifteen years before, and had remained there ever since. She was the mildest, softest-hearted, most devoted and affectionate creature that was ever put into a position of authority; and the least authoritative. Yet her word 'went' through all the household.

"It *is* a jolly house, you know, dear," said Caroline, after she had fully examined pictures and papers. "I'm not sure that it isn't the very one, at last. But are you sure you can afford it, darling? It seems a great deal of money."

"It's rather cheap, really. They've stuck on a lot for the furniture and things. But they say that it's

not nearly what they're worth. They'll sell the place without them if I like, and have a sale of them. They say they'd fetch much more than they're asking me."

"Well, then, why don't they do it?"

"Oh, I don't know. But we could go and have a look and see what they are worth—to us, I mean. After all, we should buy just that sort of thing, and it would take us a lot of time and trouble. We should probably have to pay more in the long run, too."

"I had rather looked forward to furnishing. I should like the trouble, and I've got plenty of time. And you've got plenty of money, darling, unless you've been deceiving us all this time."

"Well, shall we go and have a look at it together? What about to-morrow? Have you got anything to do?"

"Yes, lots. But I don't think there's anything I can't put off. How far is it from London? Shall we motor down?"

"Yes, if it's fine. We'd better, in any case, as it's five miles from a station, and we might not be able to get a car there. I don't think I could stand five miles in a horse fly."

"You're always so impatient, darling. Having your own way so much has spoiled you. I expect B will want to come."

"Well, she can if she likes."

"I think I'd rather it was just you and me. We always have a lot of fun together."

He gave her a hug and a kiss. The butler came in

at that moment with the tea-tray, and smiled paternally. The footman who followed him looked abashed.

"Look, Jarvis, we've found the very house," said Caroline, exhibiting a large photograph of Abington Abbey.

"Lor, miss!" said the butler indulgently.

Beatrix and Barbara came in, accompanied by the Dragon.

Beatrix was even prettier than Caroline, with a frail ethereal loveliness that made her appear almost too good for this sinful world, which she wasn't at all, though she was a very charming creature. She was very fair, with a delicious complexion of cream and roses, and a figure of extreme slimness. She was still supposed to be in the schoolroom, and occasionally was so. She was only just eighteen, and wore her hair looped and tied with a big bow; but she would be presented in the spring and would then blossom fully.

Barbara was very fair too,—a pretty girl with a smiling good-humoured face, but not so pretty as her sisters. She had her arm in that of the Dragon.

Miss Waterhouse was tall and straight, with plentiful grey hair, and handsome regular features. Her age was given in the Grafton family as 'fifty if a day,' but she was not quite so old as that. She was one of those women who seem to be cut out for motherhood, and to have missed their vocation by not marrying, just as a born artist would have missed his if he had never handled a brush or a pen. Fortunately, such women usually find somebody else's children round whom

to throw their all-embracing tenderness. Miss Waterhouse had found the engaging family of Grafton, and loved them just as if they had been her own. It was probably a good deal owing to her that George Grafton had not made a second marriage. Men whose wives die young, leaving them with a family of small children, sometimes do so for their sake. But the young Graftons had missed nothing in the way of feminine care; their father had had no anxiety on their account during their childhood, and they had grown into companions to him, in a way that they might not have done if they had had a step-mother. He owed more than he knew to the Dragon, though he knew that he owed her a great deal. She was of importance in the house, but she was self-effacing. He was the centre round which everything moved. He received a great deal from his children that they would have given to their mother if she had been alive. He was a fortunate man, at the age of fifty; for family affection is one of the greatest gifts of life, and he had it in full measure.

"We've found the very house, boys," he said, as the three of them came in. "Abington Abbey, in Meadshire. Here you are. Replete with every modern comfort and convenience. Cara and I are going to take a day off to-morrow and go down to have a look at it."

Beatrix took up the photographs. "Yes, I like that house," she said. "I think you've struck it this time, darling. I'm sorry I can't come with you. I'm going to fence. But I trust to you both entirely."

"Do you think Uncle Jim will like you taking a

day off, George, dear?" asked Barbara. "You had two last week, you know. You mustn't neglect your work. I don't. The Dragon won't let me."

"Barbara, darling," said Miss Waterhouse in a voice of gentle expostulation, "I don't think you should call your father George. It isn't respectful."

Barbara kissed her. "You don't mind, do you, Daddy?" she asked.

"Yes, I do, from you," he said. "You're my infant in arms. 'Daddy' is much prettier from little girls."

"Darling old thing!" she said. "You shall have it your own way. But we do spoil you. Now about this Abington Abbey. Are there rats? If so, I won't go there."

"Is there a nice clergyman?" asked Beatrix. "You and Caroline must call on the clergyman, and tell me what he's like when you come home; and how many children he has; and all about the neighbours. A nice house is all very well, but you want nice people too. Somebody you can make fun of."

"B darling," expostulated the Dragon again. "I don't think you should set out by making fun of people. You will want to make friends of your neighbours, not fun of them."

"We can do both," said Beatrix. "Will you be the Squire, dear? I should like you to be a little Squire. You'd do it awfully well, better than Uncle Jim."

Sir James Grafton was George's elder brother, and head of the bank. He was a good banker, but a better chemist. He had fitted himself up a laboratory in his

country house, and spent as much of his time in it as possible, somewhat to the detriment of his duties as a landowner.

"It will be great fun being Squire's daughters," said Caroline. "I'm glad we are going to have a house of our very own. When you only take them for a month or two you feel like a Londoner all the time. B, you and I will become dewy English girls. I believe it will suit us."

"I don't want to become a dewy English girl just yet," said Beatrix. "It's all very well for you. You've had two seasons. Still, I shan't mind living in the country a good part of the year. There's always plenty to do there. But I do hope there'll be a nice lot of people about. Is it what they call a good residential neighbourhood, Daddy? They always make such a lot of that."

"I don't know much about Meadshire," said Grafton. "I think it's a trifle stuffy. People one never sees, who give themselves airs. Still, if we don't like them we needn't bother ourselves about them. We can get our own friends down."

"I'm not sure that's the right spirit," said Caroline. "I want to do the thing thoroughly. The church is very near the house, isn't it? I hope we're not right in the middle of the village too. You want to be a little by yourself in the country."

The photographs, indeed, showed the church—a fine square-towered Early English structure—directly opposite the front door of the house, the main part of

which was late Jacobean. The cloisters and the old rambling mediæval buildings of the Abbey were around the corner, and other photographs showed them delightfully irregular and convincing. But the gardens and the park enclosed it all. The village was a quarter of a mile away, just outside one of the Lodge gates. "I asked all about that," said Grafton, explaining it to them.

They gathered round the tea-table in their comfortable luxurious room,—a happy affectionate family party. Their talk was all of the new departure that was at last to be made, for all of them took it for granted that they really had found the very house at last, and the preliminary visit and enquiries and negotiations were not likely to reveal any objections or difficulties.

George Grafton had been looking for a country house in a leisurely kind of way for the past ten years, and with rather more determination for about two. He belonged to the class of business man to whom it is as natural to have a country house as to have a London house, not only for convenience in respect of his work, but also for his social pleasures. He had been brought up chiefly in the country, at Frayne, in the opulent Sevenoaks region, which his brother now inhabited. He had usually taken a country house furnished during some part of the year, sometimes on the river for the summer months, sometimes for the winter, with a shoot attached to it. His pleasures were largely country pleasures. And his children liked what they had had

of country life, of which they had skimmed the cream, in the periods they had spent in the houses that he had taken, and in frequent short visits to those of friends and relations. In the dead times of the year they had come back to London, to their occupations and amusements there. One would have said that they had had the best of both. If they had been pure Londoners by birth and descent no doubt they would have had, and been well content. But it was in their blood on both sides to want that mental hold over a country home, which houses hired for a few months at a time cannot give. None of the houses their father had taken could be regarded as their home. Nor could a house in London, however spacious and homelike.

They talked about this now, over the tea-table. "It will be jolly to have all that space round you and to feel that it belongs to you," said Caroline. "I shall love to go out in the morning and stroll about, without a hat, and pick flowers."

"And watch them coming up," said Barbara. "That's what I shall like. And not having *always* to go out with the Dragon. Of course, I shall generally want you to come with me, darling, and I should always behave exactly as if you were there—naturally, as I'm a good girl. But I expect you will like to go out by yourself sometimes too, without one of the Graftons always hanging to you."

"You'll like the country, won't you, dear?" asked Beatrix. "I think you must go about with a key-basket, and feed the sparrows after breakfast."

"I was brought up in the country," said Miss Waterhouse. "I shall feel more at home there than you will."

"Your mother would have loved the garden," said Grafton. "She always missed her garden."

"Grandfather showed me the corner she had at Frampton when she was little," said Caroline. "There's an oak there where she planted an acorn. It takes up nearly the whole of it now."

"Where is it?" asked her father. "I never knew that. I should like to see it."

Caroline described the spot to him. "Ah, yes," he said, "I do remember now; she showed it me herself when we were engaged."

"Grandfather showed it to me too," said Beatrix.

"Yes, I know," said Caroline quickly. "You were there."

Their mother was often spoken of in this way, naturally, and not with any sadness or regret. Caroline remembered her. Beatrix said she did, and was inclined to be a little jealous of Caroline's memories.

"I think I'll come with you after all, to-morrow," said Beatrix. "I can put off my fencing for once."

"Yes, do, darling," said Caroline. "You and I and Dad will have a jolly day together."

CHAPTER II

THE VICAR

THE Vicar of Abington was the Reverend A. Salisbury Mercer M.A., with a tendency towards hyphenation of the two names, though the more resounding of them had been given to him at baptism in token of his father's admiration for a great statesman. He was middle-sized, but held himself in such a way as to give the impression of height, or at least of dignity. His dignity was, indeed, dear to him, and his chief quarrel with the world, in which he had otherwise made himself very comfortable, was that there were so many people who failed to recognise it. His wife, however, was not one of them. She thought him the noblest of men, and more often in the right than not. He was somewhere in the early fifties, and she about ten years younger. She was a nice good-tempered little lady, inclined to easy laughter, but not getting much occasion for it in her home, for the Reverend A. Salisbury Mercer took life seriously, as became a man of his profession. She had brought him money—not a great deal of money, but enough to give him a well-appointed comfortable home, which the emoluments of Abington Vicarage would not have given him of themselves. In clerical and clerically-minded society he was accus-

tomed to complain of the inequalities of such emoluments in the Church of England. "Look at Abington," he would say, some time in the course of the discussion. "There's a fine church, which wants a good deal of keeping up, and there's a good house; but the value of the living has come down to about a hundred and thirty a year. No man without private means—considerable private means—could possibly afford to take it. And those men are getting scarcer and scarcer. After me, I don't know what will happen at Abington."

The village of Abington consisted mainly of one broad street lined on either side with red brick houses, cottages and little shops. The Vicarage was a good-sized Georgian house which abutted right on to the pavement, and had cottages built against it on one side and its own stable-yard on the other. The Vicar was often inclined to complain of its consequent lack of privacy, but the fact that its front windows provided an uninterrupted view of the village street, and what went on there, went a good way towards softening the deprivation. For he liked to know what his flock were doing. He took a good deal of responsibility for their actions.

One of the front rooms downstairs was the study. The Vicar's writing-table was arranged sideways to the window, so that he could get the light coming from the left while he was writing. If he looked up he had a good view right down the village street, which took a very slight turn when the Vicarage was passed. Another reason he had for placing his table in this posi-

tion was that it was a good thing for his parishioners to see him at work. "The idea that a clergyman's life is an easy one," he would say to any one who might show a tendency to advance or even to hold that opinion, "is quite wrong. His work is never ended, either within or without. I myself spend many hours a day at my desk, but all that the public sees of what I do there is represented by an hour or two in church during the week."

An irrepressible nephew of his wife engaged in London journalism, to whom this had once been said during a week-end visit, had replied: "Do you mean to say, Uncle, that the sermon you preached this morning took you hours to write up? I could have knocked it off in half an hour, and then I should have had most of it blue-pencilled."

That irreverent young man had not been asked to the house again, but it had been explained to him that sermon-writing was not the chief labour of a parish priest. He had a great deal of correspondence to get through, and he had to keep himself up in contemporary thought. The Vicar, indeed, did most of his reading sitting at his table, with his head propped on his hand. Few people could beat him in his knowledge of contemporary thought as infused through the brains of such writers as Mr. Philips Oppenheim, Mr. Charles Garvice, and Mr. William le Queux. Women writers he did not care for, but he made an exception in favour of Mrs. Florence Barclay, whose works he judged to contain the right proportions of strength and feeling. It must not

be supposed that he was at all ashamed of his novel-reading, as some foolish people are. He was not ashamed of anything that he did, and, as for novels, he would point out that the proper study of mankind was man, and that next to studying the human race for yourself, it was the best thing to read the works of those authors who had trained themselves to observe it. Literature, as such, had nothing to do with it. If you wanted literature you could not have anything finer than certain parts of the Old Testament. It was hardly worth while going to modern authors for that. The more literature there was in a modern novel, the less human nature you would be likely to find. No; it would generally be found that the public taste was the right taste in these matters, whatever people who thought themselves superior might say. He himself claimed no superiority in such matters. He supposed he had a brain about as good as the average, but what was good enough for some millions of his fellow-countrymen was good enough for him. He preferred to leave Mr. Henry James to others who thought differently.

The "Daily Telegraph" came by the second post, at about twelve o'clock, and Mrs. Mercer was accustomed to bring it in to her husband, with whatever letters there were for him or for her. She liked to stay and chat with him for a time, and sometimes, if there was anything that invited discussion in her letters, he would encourage her to do so. But he generally happened to be rather particularly busy at this time, not, of course,

with novel-reading, which was usually left till a later hour. He would just 'glance through the paper' and then she must really leave him. They could talk about anything that wanted talking about at lunch. He would glance through the paper hurriedly and then lay it aside and return to his writing; but when she had obediently left the room he would take up the paper again. It was necessary for him to know what was going on in the world. His wife never took the paper away with her. She had her own "Daily Mirror," which he despised and sometimes made her ashamed of reading, but never to the extent of persuading her to give it up. He was a kind husband, and seldom let a day go by without looking through it himself, out of sympathy with her.

On this March morning Mrs. Mercer brought in the "Daily Telegraph." It was all that had come by the post, except circulars, with which she never troubled him, and her own "Daily Mirror." She rather particularly wanted to talk to him, as he had come home late the night before from a day in London, and had not since felt inclined to tell her anything about it. Whether she would have succeeded or not if she had not come upon him reading a novel which he had bought the day before is doubtful. As it was, he did not send her away on the plea of being particularly busy.

"Ah!" he said, laying the book decidedly aside. "I was just looking through this. It is so good that I am quite looking forward to reading it this evening. Well, what's the news with you, my dear?"

Little Mrs. Mercer brightened. She knew his tones; and he was so nice when he was like this. "It's me that ought to ask what's the news with you," she said. "You haven't told me anything of what you did or heard yesterday."

He had been glancing through the paper, but looked up. "There is one thing I heard that may interest you," he said. "I sat next to a man at lunch at the Club and got into conversation with him, or rather he with me, and when it came out that I was Vicar of Abington he said: 'Is that the Abington in Meadshire?' and when I said yes he said: 'I've had Abington Abbey on my books for a long time, and I believe I've let it at last.' He was a House-Agent, a very respectable fellow; the membership of a club like that is rather mixed, but I should have taken him for a barrister at least, except that he had seemed anxious to get into conversation with me."

"It's like that in trams and buses," said Mrs. Mercer. "Anybody who starts a conversation isn't generally as good as the person they start it with."

The Vicar let this pass. "He told me," he said, "that a client of his—he called him a client—who had been looking out for a country house for some time had taken a fancy to the Abbey, and said that if the photographs represented it properly, which they generally didn't when you saw the place itself, and everything else turned out to be as it had been represented, he thought it would suit him. He should come down and look at it very soon."

"Who is he?" asked Mrs. Mercer. "Did he tell you?"

"He did not tell me his name. He said he was a gentleman in the City. I asked the name, but apparently it isn't etiquette for that sort of people to give it. Every calling, of course, has its own conventions in such matters. I said we didn't think much of gentlemen in the City in this part of the world, and I rather hoped his friend would find that the place did not suit him. Some of us were not particularly rich, but we were quite content as we were. By that time he had become, as I thought, a little over-familiar, which is why I said that."

"I think you were quite right, dear. What did he say?"

"Oh, he laughed. He had finished his lunch by that time, and went away without saying a word. These half-gentlemen always break down in their manners somewhere."

"Anybody who could buy the Abbey must be pretty rich. It won't be a bad thing for the parish to have somebody with money in it again."

"No, there is that. Anybody meaner than Mr. Compton-Brett it would be difficult to imagine. We could hardly be worse off in that respect than we are at present."

Mr. Compton-Brett was the owner of Abington Abbey, with the acreage attached thereto, and the advowson that went with it. He was a rich bachelor, who lived the life of a bookish recluse in chambers in

the Albany. He had inherited Abington from a distant relation, and only visited it under extreme pressure, about once a year. He refused to let it, and had also refused many advantageous offers to sell. A buyer must accept his terms or leave it alone. They included the right of presentation to the living of Abington at its full actuarial value, and he would not sell the right separately. Rich men who don't want money allow themselves these luxuries of decision. It must amuse them in some way, and they probably need amusement. For a man who can't get it out of dealing with more money than will provide for his personal needs must be lacking in imagination.

"I hope they will be nice people to know," said Mrs. Mercer, "and won't give themselves airs."

"They won't give themselves airs over me twice," replied her husband loftily. "As a matter of fact, these new rich people who buy country places are often glad to have somebody to advise them. For all their money they are apt to make mistakes."

"Are they new people? Did the House-Agent say that?"

"Well, no. But it's more likely than not. 'A gentleman in the City,' he said. That probably means somebody who has made a lot of money and wants to blossom out as a gentleman in the country."

Mrs. Mercer laughed at this, as it seemed to be expected of her. "I hope he *will* be a gentleman," she said. "I suppose there will be a lady too, and perhaps a family. It will be rather nice to have some-

body living at the Abbey. We are not too well off for nice neighbours."

"I should think we are about as badly off as anybody can be," said the Vicar. "There is not a soul in the village itself who is any good to anybody except, of course, Mrs. Walter and Mollie; and as for the people round—well, you know yourself that a set of people more difficult to get on with it would be impossible to find anywhere. I am not a quarrelsome man. Except where my sacred calling is in question, my motto is 'Live and let live.' But the people about us here will not do that. Each one of them seems to *want* to quarrel. I sincerely hope that these new people at the Abbey will not want that. If they do, well——"

"Oh, I hope not," said little Mrs. Mercer hastily. "I do hope we shall all be good friends, especially if there is a nice family. Whoever buys the Abbey will be your patron, won't he, dear? Mr. Worthing has often told us that Mr. Compton-Brett won't sell the property without selling the patronage of the living."

"Whoever buys the property will have the *future* right to present to this living," replied the Vicar. "He will have no more right of patronage over me than anybody else. If there is likely to be any doubt about that I shall take an early opportunity of making it plain."

"Oh, I'm sure there won't be," said Mrs. Mercer. "I only meant that he *would* be patron of the living; not that he would have any authority over the present incumbent. Of course, I know he wouldn't have that."

"*You* know it, my dear, because you are in the way of knowing such elementary facts. But it is extraordinary what a large number of people are ignorant of them. A rich self-made City man, with not much education behind him, perhaps not even a churchman, is just the sort of person to be ignorant of such things. He is quite likely to think that because he has bought the right to present to a living he has also bought the right to domineer over the incumbent. It is what the rich Dissenters do over their ministers. If this new man is a Dissenter, as he is quite likely to be if he is anything at all, he will be almost certain to take that view. Well, as I say, I am a man of peace, but I know where I stand, and for the sake of my office I shall not budge an inch."

The Vicar breathed heavily. Mrs. Mercer felt vaguely distressed. Her husband was quite right, of course. There did seem to be a sort of conspiracy all round them to refuse him the recognition of his claims, which were only those he felt himself bound to make as a beneficed priest of the Church of England, and for the honour of the Church itself. Still, the recognition of such claims had not as yet been actually denied him from this new-comer, whose very name they did not yet know. It seemed to be settled that he was self-made, ignorant and in all probability a Dissenter; but he might be quite nice all the same, and his family still nicer. It seemed a pity to look for trouble before it came. They hadn't, as it was admitted between them, too many friends, and she did like to have friends.

Even among the people round them whom it was awkward to meet in the road there were some whom she would have been quite glad to be on friendly terms with again, in spite of the way they had behaved to her husband.

She was preparing to say in an encouraging manner something to the effect that people were generally nicer than they appeared to be at first sight. Her husband would almost certainly have replied that the exact contrary was the case, and brought forward instances known to them both to prove it. So it was just as well that there was a diversion at this moment. It took the form of a large opulent-looking motor-car, which was passing slowly down the village street, driven by a smart-looking uniformed chauffeur, while a middle-aged man and a young girl sat behind and looked about them enquiringly on either side. They were George Grafton and Caroline, who supposed that they had reached the village of Abington by this time, but were as yet uncertain of the whereabouts of the Abbey. At that moment a question was being put by the chauffeur to one of the Vicar's parishioners on the pavement. He replied to it with a pointing finger, and the car slid off at a faster pace down the street.

"That must be them!" said Mrs. Mercer in some excitement. "They do look nice, Albert—quite gentlepeople, I must say."

The Vicar had also gathered that it must be 'them,' and was as favourably impressed by their appearance as his wife. But it was not his way to take any opin-

ion from her, or even to appear to do so. "If it is our gentleman from the City," he said, "he would certainly be rich enough to make that sort of appearance. But I should think it is very unlikely. However, I shall probably find out if it is he, as I must go up to the church. I'll tell you when I come back."

She did not ask if she might go with him, although she must have known well enough that his visit to the church had been decided on, on the spur of the moment, so that he might get just that opportunity for investigation of which she herself would frankly have acknowledged she was desirous. He would have rebuked her for her prying disposition, and declined her company.

He went out at once, and she watched him walk quickly down the village street, his head and body held very stiff—a pompous man, a self-indulgent man, an ignorant self-satisfied man, but her lord and master, and with some qualities, mostly hidden from others, which caused her to admire him.

CHAPTER III

THE FIRST VISIT

THE Vicar was in luck, if what he really wanted was an opportunity of introducing himself to the newcomers. At the end of the village the high stone wall which enclosed the park of the Abbey began, and curved away to the right. The entrance was by a pair of fine iron gates flanked by an ancient stone lodge. A little further on was a gate in the wall, which led to a path running across the park to the church. When he came in view of the entrance the car was standing in front of the gates, and its occupants were just alighting from it to make their way to the smaller gate.

The Vicar hurried up to them and took off his hat. "Are you trying to get in to the Abbey?" he said. "The people of the lodge ought to be there to open the gates."

Grafton turned to him with his pleasant smile. "There doesn't seem to be anybody there," he said. "We thought we'd go in by this gate, and my man could go and see if he could get the keys of the house. We want to look over it."

"But the lodge-keeper certainly ought to be there," said the Vicar, and hurried back to the larger gate,

at which he lifted up his voice in accents of command. "Mrs. Roeband!" he called, "Mrs. Roeband! Roeband!! Where are you all? I'm afraid they must be out, sir."

"Yes, I'm afraid they must," said Grafton. "But please don't bother about it. Perhaps you could tell my man where to get the keys."

"They ought not to leave the place like this," said the Vicar in an annoyed voice. "It's quite wrong; quite wrong. I must find out the reason for it. I think the best way, sir, would be for your man to go to the Estate Office. I'll tell him."

He gave directions to the chauffeur, while Grafton and Caroline stood by, stealing a glance at one another as some slight failure on the chauffeur's part to understand him caused the Vicar's voice to be raised impatiently.

It was a sweet and mild March day, but the long fast drive had chilled them both in spite of their furs. Caroline's pretty face looked almost that of a child with its fresh colour, but her long fur coat, very expensive even to the eye of the uninitiated, and the veil she wore, made the Vicar take her for the young wife of the 'gentleman from the City,' as he turned again towards them, especially as she had slipped her arm into her father's as they stood waiting, and was evidently much attached to him. Grafton himself looked younger than his years, with his skin freshened by the cold and his silver hair hidden under his cap. "A newly married couple," thought the Vicar, now ready

to put himself at their service and do the honours of the place that they had come to see.

"It isn't far to walk to the Abbey," he said. "You will save time. I will show you the way."

He led them through the gate, and they found themselves in a beechy glade, with great trees rising on either side of the hollow, and a little herd of deer grazing not far from the path.

Caroline exclaimed in delight. "Oh, how topping!" she said. "You didn't tell me there were deer, Dad."

"Oh, father and daughter!" the Vicar corrected himself. "I wonder where the wife is!"

"I had better introduce myself," he said affably, as they walked through the glade together. "Salisbury Mercer my name is. I'm the Vicar of the parish, as I dare say you have gathered. We have been without a resident Squire here for some years. Naturally a great deal of responsibility rests upon me, some of which I shouldn't be altogether sorry to be relieved of. I hope you are thinking of acquiring the place, sir, and if you are that it will suit you. I should be very glad to see the Abbey occupied again."

"Well, it seems as if it might be the place for us," said Grafton. "We're going to have a good look at it anyhow. How long has it been empty?"

"Mr. Compton-Brett inherited it about six years ago. He comes down occasionally, but generally shuts himself up when he does. He isn't much use to anybody. An old couple lived here before him—his cousins. They weren't much use to anybody either—very can-

tankerous both of them. Although the old man had presented me to the living—on the advice of the bishop—a year before he died, he set himself against me in every way here, and actually refused to see me when he was dying. The old lady was a little more amenable afterwards, and I was with her at the last—she died within six months. But you see I have not been very fortunate here so far. That is why I am anxious that the right sort of people should have the place. A clergyman's work is difficult enough without having complications of that sort added to it."

"Well, I hope we shall be the right sort of people if we do come," said Grafton genially. "You'll like going about visiting the poor, won't you, Cara?"

"I don't know," said Caroline. "I've never tried it."

The Vicar looked at her critically. He did not quite like her tone; and so young a girl as she now showed herself to be should not have been looking away from him with an air almost of boredom. But she was a 'lady'; that was quite evident to him. She walked with her long coat thrown open, showing her beautifully cut tweed coat and skirt and her neat country boots—country boots from Bond Street, or thereabouts. A very well-dressed, very pretty girl—really a remarkably pretty girl when you came to look at her, though off-hand in her manners and no doubt rather spoilt. The Vicar had an eye for a pretty girl—as the shape of his mouth and chin might have indicated to an acute observer. Perhaps it might be

worth while to make himself pleasant to this one. The hard lot of vicars is sometimes alleviated by the devotion of the younger female members of their flock, in whom they can take an affectionate and fatherly, or at least avuncular, interest.

"There isn't much actual visiting of the poor as poor in a parish like this," he said. "It isn't like a district in London. But I'm sure a lot of the cottagers will like to see you when you get to know them." He had thought of adding 'my dear,' but cut it out of his address as Caroline turned her clear uninterested gaze upon them.

"Oh, of course I shall hope to get to know some of them as friends," she said, "if we come here. Oh, look, Dad. Isn't it ripping?"

The wide two-storied front of the house stood revealed to them at the end of another vista among the beeches. It stood on a level piece of ground with the church just across the road which ran past it. The churchyard was surrounded by a low stone wall, and the grass of the park came right up to it. The front of the house was regular, with a fine doorway in the middle, and either end slightly advanced. But on the nearer side a long line of ancient irregular buildings ran back and covered more ground than the front itself. They were faced by a lawn contained within a sunk fence. The main road through the park ran along one side of it, and along the other was a road leading to stables and back premises. This lawn was of considerable size, but had no garden decoration except an

ancient sun-dial. It made a beautiful setting for the little old stone and red-brick and red-tiled buildings which seemed to have been strung out with no design, and yet made a perfect and entrancing whole. Tall trees, amongst which showed the sombre tones of deodars and yews, rising above and behind the roofs and chimneys, showed the gardens to be on the other side of the house.

"Perhaps you would like to look at the church first," said the Vicar, "while the keys are being fetched. It is well worth seeing. We are proud of our church here. And if I may say so it will be a great convenience to you to have it so close."

Caroline was all eagerness to see what there was to be seen of this entrancing house, even before the keys came. She didn't in the least want to spend time over the church at this stage. Nor did her father. But this Vicar seemed to have taken possession of them. They both began to wonder how, if ever, they were to shake him off, and intimated the same by mutual glances as he unlocked the door of the church, explaining that he did not keep it open while the house was empty, as it was so far from everywhere, but that he should be pleased to do so when the Abbey was once more occupied. He was quite at his ease now, and rather enjoying himself. The amenity which the two of them had shewn in following him into the church inclined him to the belief that they would be easy to get on with and to direct in the paths that lay within his domain. He had dropped his preformed ideas of

them. They were not 'new,' nor half-educated, and obviously they couldn't be Dissenters. But Londoners they had been announced to be, and he still took it for granted that they would want a good deal of shepherding. Well, that was what he was there for, and it would be quite a pleasant task, with people obviously so well endowed with this world's goods, and able to give something in return that would redound to the dignity of the church, and his as representing it. His heart warmed to them as he pointed out what there was of interest in the ancient well-preserved building, and indicated now and then the part they would be expected to play in the activities that lay within his province to direct.

"Those will be your pews," he said, pointing to the chancel. "I shall be glad to see them filled again regularly. It will be a good example to the villagers. And I shall have you under my own eye, you see, from my reading-desk opposite."

This was said to Caroline, in a tone that meant a pleasantry, and invited one in return. She again met his smile with a clear unconcerned look, and wondered when the keys of the house would come, and they would be relieved of this tiresome person.

The car was heard outside at that moment, and Grafton said: "Well, thank you very much. We mustn't keep you any longer. Yes, it's a fine old church; I hope we shall know it better by and by."

He never went to church in London, and seldom in the country, and had not thought of becoming a regu-

lar churchgoer if he should buy Abington. But the girls and Miss Waterhouse would go on Sunday mornings and he would occupy the chancel pew with them occasionally. He meant no more than that, but the Vicar put him down gratefully as probably 'a keen churchman,' and his heart warmed to him still further. An incumbent's path was made so much easier if his Squire backed him up, and it made such a tie between them. It would be a most pleasant state of things if there was real sympathy and community of interest between the Vicarage and the great house. He knew of Rectories and Vicarages in which the Squire of the parish was never seen, with the converse disadvantage that the rector or vicar was never seen in the Squire's house. Evidently nothing of the sort was to be feared here. He would do all he could to create a good understanding at the outset. As for leaving these nice people to make their way about the Abbey with only the lodge-keeper's wife, now arrived breathless and apologetic on the scene, it was not to be thought of. He would rather lose his lunch than forsake them at this stage.

It was in fact nearly lunch time. Grafton, hitherto so amenable to suggestion, exercised decision. "We have brought a luncheon-basket with us," he said, standing before the door of the house, which the lodge-keeper was unlocking. "We shall picnic somewhere here before we look over the house. So I'll say good-bye, and thank you very much indeed for all the trouble you've taken."

He held out his hand, but the Vicar was not ready

to take it yet, though dismissal, for the present, he would take, under the circumstances. "Oh, but I can't say good-bye like this," he said. "I feel I haven't done half enough for you. There's such a lot you may want to know about things in general, your new neighbours and so on. Couldn't you both come to tea at the Vicarage? I'm sure my wife would be very pleased to make your acquaintance, and that of this young lady."

"It's very kind of you," said Grafton. "But it will take us some hours to get back to London, and we don't want to get there much after dark. We shall have to start fairly early."

But the Vicar would take no denial. Tea could be as early as they liked—three o'clock, if that would suit them. Really, he must insist upon their coming. So they had to promise, and at last he took himself off.

The house was a joy to them both. They got rid of the lodge-keeper, who was anxious to go home and prepare her husband's dinner. She was apologetic at having been away from her lodge, but explained that she had only been down to the Estate office to draw her money.

"Is there a regular Agent?" asked Grafton. "If so, I should like to see him before I go."

She explained that Mr. Worthing was agent both for Abington and Wilborough, Sir Alexander Mansergh's place, which adjoined it. He lived at High Wood Farm about a mile away. He wasn't so often at Abington as at Wilborough, but could be sum-

moned by telephone if he was wanted. Grafton asked her to get a message to him, and she left them alone.

Then they started their investigations, while the chauffeur laid out lunch for them on a table in the hall.

The hall was large and stone-floored, and took up the middle part of the later regular building. The sun streamed into it obliquely through tall small-paned windows at this hour of the day; otherwise it had the air of being rather sombre, with its cumbrous dark-coloured furniture. There was a great fire-place at one end of it, with a dark almost indecipherable canvas over it. It was not a hall to sit about in, except perhaps in the height of summer, for the front door opened straight into it, and the inner hall and staircase opened out of it without doors or curtains. A massive oak table took up a lot of room in the middle, and there were ancient oak chairs and presses and benches disposed stiffly against the walls.

"Doesn't it smell good," said Caroline. "Rather like graves; but the nicest sort of graves. It's rather dull, though. I suppose this furniture is very valuable. It looks as if it ought to be."

Grafton looked a little doubtful. "I suppose we'd better have it, if they don't want a terrific price," he said. "It's the right sort of thing, no doubt; but I'd rather have a little less of it. Let's go and see if there's another room big enough to get some fun out of. What about the long gallery? I wonder where that is."

They found it on the side of the house opposite to that from which they had first approached it—a delightful oak-panelled oak-floored room with a long row of latticed windows looking out on to a delicious old-world garden, all clipped yews and shaven turf and ordered beds, with a backing of trees and an invitation to more delights beyond, in the lie of the grass and flagged paths, and the arched and arcaded yews. It was big enough to take the furniture of three or four good-sized rooms and make separate groupings of it, although what furniture there was, was disposed stiffly, as in the case of the hall.

"Oh, what a heavenly room!" Caroline exclaimed. "I can see it at a glance, George darling. We'll keep nearly all this furniture, and add to it chintzy sofas and easy chairs. A grand piano up at that end. Won't it be jolly to have all the flowers we want? I suppose there are hot-houses for the winter. You won't have any excuse for accusing me of extravagance about flowers any longer, darling."

She babbled on delightedly. The sun threw the patterns of the latticed windows on the dark and polished oak floor. She opened one of the casements, and let in the soft sweet spring air. The birds were singing gaily in the garden. "It's all heavenly," she said. "This room sums it up. Oh, why does anybody live in a town?"

Her father was hardly less pleased than she. Except for the blow dealt him fifteen years before by the death of his wife, the fates had been very kind to him.

The acuteness of that sorrow had long since passed away, and the tenderness in his nature had diffused itself over the children that her love had given him. The satisfaction of his life—his successful work, his friendships, his pastimes, the numerous interests which no lack of money or opportunity ever prevented his following up—were all sweetened to him by the affection and devotion that was his in his home. And his home was the best of all the good things in his life. It came to him now, as he stood by the window with his daughter,—the beautiful spacious room which they would adapt to their happy life on one side of him, the peaceful sunlit bird-haunted charm of the garden on the other,—that this new setting would heighten and centralise the sweet intimacies of their home life. Abington Abbey would be much more to them than an increase of opportunities for enjoyment. It would be the warm nest of their love for one another, as no house in a city could be. He was not a particularly demonstrative man, though he had caresses for his children, and would greatly have missed their pretty demonstrations of affection for him; but he loved them dearly, and found no society as pleasant as theirs. There would be a great deal of entertaining at Abington Abbey, but the happiest hours spent there would be those of family life.

They lunched in the big hall, with the door wide open, the sun coming in and the stillness of the country and the empty house all about them. Then they made their detailed investigations. It was all just what they

wanted—some big rooms and many fascinating small ones. The furniture was the usual mixture to be found in old-established, long-inhabited houses. Some of it was very fine, some of it very ordinary. But there was an air about the whole house that could not have been created by new furnishing, however carefully it might be done. Caroline saw it. "I think we'd better leave it alone as much as possible," she said. "We can get what we want extra for comfort, and add to the good things here and there. We don't want to make it look new, do we?"

"Just as you like, darling," said her father. "It's your show. We can string it up a bit where it's shabby, and make it comfortable and convenient. Otherwise it will do all right. I don't want it too smart. We're going to be country people here, not Londoners in the country."

They wandered about the gardens. It was just that time of year, and just the day, in which spring seems most visibly and blessedly coming. The crocuses were in masses of purple and gold, violets and primroses and hepaticas bloomed shyly in sheltered corners, daffodils were beginning to lower their buds and show yellow at their tips. They took as much interest in the garden as in the house. It was to be one of their delights. They had the garden taste, and some knowledge, as many Londoners of their sort have. They made plans, walking along the garden paths, Caroline's arm slipped affectionately into her father's. This was to be their garden to play with, which is a very

different thing from admiring other people's gardens, however beautiful and interesting they may be.

"George darling, I don't think we *can* miss all this in the spring and early summer," said Caroline. "Let's get into the house as soon as we can, and cut all the tiresome London parties altogether."

CHAPTER IV

NEIGHBOURS

They were standing by one of the old monks' fish stews, which made such a charming feature of the yew-set formal garden, when a step was heard on the path and they turned to see a cheerful-looking gentleman approaching them, with a smile of welcome on his handsome features. He was a tall man of middle-age, dressed in almost exaggerated country fashion, in rough home-spun, very neat about the gaitered legs, and was followed by a bull-dog of ferocious but endearing aspect. "Ah!" he exclaimed, in a loud and breezy voice as he approached them, "I thought it must be you when I saw your name on the order. If you've forgotten me I shall never forgive you."

Grafton was at a loss for a moment. Then his face cleared. "Jimmy Worthing," he said. "Of course. They did mention your name. Cara, this is Mr. Worthing. We were at school together a hundred years or so ago. My eldest daughter, Caroline."

Worthing was enchanted, and said so. He was one of those cheerful voluble men who never do have any difficulty in saying so. With his full but active figure and fresh clean-shaven face he was a pleasant object of the countryside, and Caroline's heart warmed to

him as he smiled his commonplaces and showed himself so abundantly friendly. It appeared from the conversation that followed that he had been a small boy in George Grafton's house at Eton when Grafton had been a big one, that they had not met since, except once, years before at Lord's, but were quite pleased to meet now. Also that Worthing had been agent to the Abington property for the past twelve years, and to the Wilborough property adjoining it for about half that time. A good deal of this information was addressed to Caroline with friendly familiarity. She was used to the tone from well-preserved middle-aged men. It was frankly accepted in the family that all three of the girls were particularly attractive to the mature and even the over-ripe male, and the reason given was that they made such a pal of their father that they knew the technique of making themselves so. Caroline had even succeeded in making herself too attractive to a widowed Admiral during her first season, and had had the shock of her life in being asked to step up a generation and a half at the end of it. She was inclined to be a trifle wary of the 'my dears' of elderly gentlemen, but she had narrowly watched Worthing during the process of his explanations and would not have objected if he had called her 'my dear.' He did not do so, however, though his tone to her implied it, and she answered him, where it was necessary, in the frank and friendly fashion that was so attractive in her and her sisters.

They all went over the stables and outhouses to-

gether, and then Worthing suggested a run round the estate in the car, with reference chiefly to the rearing and eventual killing of game.

"We promised to go to tea at the Vicarage," said Caroline, as her father warmly adopted the suggestion. "I suppose we ought to keep in with the Vicar. I don't know his name, but he seems a very important person here."

She had her eye on Worthing. She wanted an opinion of the Vicar, by word or by sign.

She got none. "Oh, you've seen him already, have you?" he said. "I was going to suggest you should come and have tea with me. We should be at my house by about half-past three, and it's a mile further on your road."

"We might look in on the Vicar—what's his name, by the by?—and excuse ourselves,"—said Grafton, "I want to see the coverts, and we haven't too much time. I don't suppose he'll object, will he?"

"Oh, no, we'll go and put it right with him," said Worthing. "He won't mind. His name is Mercer—a very decent fellow; does a lot of work and reads a lot of books."

"What kind of books?" asked Caroline, who also read a good many of them. She was a little disappointed that Worthing had not expressed himself with more salt on the subject of the Vicar. She had that slight touch of malice which relieves the female mind from insipidity, and she was quite sure that a more critical attitude towards the Vicar would have

been justified, and might have provided amusement. But she thought that Mr. Worthing must be either a person of no discrimination, or else one of those rather tiresome people, a peacemaker. She reserved to herself full right of criticism towards the Vicar, but would not be averse from the discovery of alleviating points about him, as they would be living so close together, and must meet occasionally.

"What kind of books?" echoed Worthing. "Oh, I don't know. Books." Which seemed to show that Caroline would search in vain among his own amiable qualities for sympathy in her literary tastes.

They all got into the big car and arrived at the Vicarage, where they were introduced to Mrs. Mercer, and allowed to depart again after apologies given and accepted, and the requisite number of minutes devoted to polite conversation.

The Vicar and his wife stood at the front door as they packed themselves again into the car. "Oh, what delightful people!" the little lady exclaimed as they drove off, with valedictory waving of hands from all three of them. "They *will* be an acquisition to us, won't they? I have never seen a prettier girl than Miss Grafton, and *such* charming manners, and *so* nicely dressed. And *he* is so nice too, and how pretty it is to see father and daughter so fond of one another! Quite an idyll, I call it. Aren't you pleased, Albert dear? *I* am."

Albert dear was not pleased, as the face he turned upon her showed when she had followed him into his

study. "The way that Worthing takes it upon himself to set aside my arrangements and affect a superiority over me in the place where I should be chief is really beyond all bearing," he said angrily. "It has happened time and again before, and I am determined that it shall not happen any further. The very next time I see him I shall give him a piece of my mind. My patience is at an end. I will not stand it any longer."

Mrs. Mercer drooped visibly. She had to recall exactly what had happened before she could get at the causes of his displeasure, which was a painful shock to her. He had given, for him, high praise to the new-comers over the luncheon-table, and she had exulted in the prospect of having people near at hand and able to add so much to the pleasures of life with whom she could make friends and not feel that she was disloyal to her husband in doing so. And her raptures over them after she had met them in the flesh had not at all exaggerated her feelings. She was of an enthusiastic disposition, apt to admire profusely where she admired at all, and these new people had been so very much worthy of admiration, with their good looks and their wealth and their charming friendly manners. However, if it was only Mr. Worthing with whom her husband was annoyed, that perhaps could be got out of the way, and he would be ready to join her in praise of the Graftons.

"Well, of course, it was rather annoying that they should be whisked off like that when we had hoped to

have had them to talk to comfortably," she said. "But I thought you didn't mind, dear. Mr. Grafton only has a few hours here, and I suppose it is natural that he should want to go round the estate. We shall see plenty of them when they come here to live."

"That is not what I am objecting to," said her husband. "Mr. Grafton made his excuses in the way a gentleman should, and it would have been absurd to have kept him to his engagement, though the girl might just as well have stayed. It can't be of the least importance that *she* should see the places where the high birds may be expected to come over, or whatever it is that they want to see. I don't care very much for the girl. There's a freedom about her manners I don't like."

"She has no mother, poor dear," interrupted Mrs. Mercer. "And her father evidently adores her. She *would* be apt to be older than her years in some respects. She was *very* nice to me."

"As I say," proceeded the Vicar dogmatically, "I've no complaint against the Graftons coming to apologise for not keeping their engagement. But I *have* a complaint when a man like Worthing comes into my house—who hardly ever takes the trouble to ask me into his—and behaves as if he had the right to over-ride me. I hate that detestable swaggering high-handed way of his, carrying off everything as if nobody had a right to exist except himself. He's no use to anybody here—hardly ever comes to church, and takes his own way in scores of matters that he ought to consult me about;

even opposes my decisions if he sees fit, and seems to think that an insincere word or smile when he meets me takes away all the offence of it. It doesn't, and it shan't do so in this instance. I shall have it out with Worthing once and for all. When these new people come here I am not going to consent to be a cipher in my own parish, or as a priest of the church take a lower place than Mr. Worthing's; who is after all nothing more than a sort of gentleman bailiff."

"Well, he *has* got a sort of way of taking matters into his own hands," said Mrs. Mercer, "that isn't always very agreeable, perhaps. But he is nice in many ways, and I shouldn't like to quarrel with him."

She knew quite well, if she did not admit it to herself, that it would be impossible to quarrel with Worthing. She herself was inclined to like him, for he was always excessively friendly, and created the effect of liking *her*. But she *did* feel that he was inclined to belittle her husband's dignity, in the way in which he took his own course, and, if it conflicted with the Vicar's wishes, set his remonstrances aside with a breezy carelessness that left them both where they were, and himself on top. Also he was not regular in his attendance at church, though he acted as churchwarden. She objected to this not so much on purely religious grounds as because it was so uncomplimentary to her husband, which were also the grounds of the Vicar's objections.

"I don't wish to quarrel with him either," said the Vicar. "I don't wish to quarrel with anybody. I

shall tell him plainly what I think, once for all, and leave it there. It will give him a warning, too, that I am not to be put aside with these new people. If handled properly I think they may be valuable people to have in the parish. A man like Grafton is likely to want to do the right thing when he comes to live in the country, and he is quite disposed, I should say, to do his duty by the church and the parish. I shall hope to show him what it is, and I shall not allow myself to be interfered with by Mr. Worthing. I shall make it my duty, too, to give Grafton some warning about the people around. Worthing is a pastmaster in the art of keeping in with everybody, worthy or unworthy, and if the Graftons are guided by him they may let themselves in for friendships and intimacies which they may be sorry for afterwards."

"You mean the Manserghs," suggested Mrs. Mercer.

"I wasn't thinking of them particularly, but of course they are *most* undesirable people. They are rich and live in a big house, and therefore everything is forgiven them. Worthing, of course, is hand in glove with them—with a man with the manners of a boor and a woman who was divorced, and an actress at that—a painted woman."

"Well, she is getting on in years now, and I suppose people have forgotten a lot," said Mrs. Mercer. "And her first husband didn't divorce her, did he? She divorced him."

"What difference does that make? You surely are

not going to stand up for her, are you? Especially after the way in which she behaved to you!"

"No," said Mrs. Mercer doubtfully. It was Lady Mansergh's behaviour to her husband that had hitherto been the chief cause of offence, her 'past' having been ignored until the time of the quarrel, or as the Vicar had since declared, unknown. "Oh, no, Albert, I think she is quite undesirable, as you say. And it would be a thousand pities if that nice girl, and her younger sisters, were to get mixed up with a woman like that. I think you should give Mr. Grafton a warning. Wilborough is the nearest big house to Abington, and I suppose it is natural that they should be friendly."

"I shall certainly do that. Mr. Grafton and Sir Alexander can shoot together and all that sort of thing, but it would be distinctly wrong for him to allow young girls like his daughters to be intimate with people like the Manserghs."

"The sons are nice, though. Fortunately Lady Mansergh is not their mother."

"Richard is away at sea most of the time, and Geoffrey is *not* particularly nice, begging your pardon. I saw him in the stalls of a theatre last year with a woman whose hair I feel sure was dyed. He is probably going the same way as his father. It would be an insult to a young and pure girl like Miss Grafton to encourage anything like intimacy between them."

"I expect they will make friends with the Pember-

tons. There are three girls in their family and three in that."

"It would be a very bad thing if they did. Three girls with the tastes of grooms, and the manners too. I shall never forget the insolent way in which that youngest one asked me if I didn't know what a bit of ribbon tied round a horse's tail meant when I was standing behind her at that meet at Surley Green, and when I didn't move at once that young cub of a brother who was with her said: "Well, sir, if you *want* to be kicked!" And then they both laughed in the vulgarest fashion. Really the manners of some of the people about here who *ought* to know better are beyond belief. The Pembertons have never had the politeness to call on us—which is *something* to be thankful for, anyhow, though it is, of course, a slight on people in our position, and no doubt meant as such. Of course they will call on the Graftons. They will expect to get something out of them. But I shall warn Grafton to be careful. He won't want his daughters to acquire their stable manners."

"No; that would be a pity. I wish Vera Beckley had been as nice as we thought she was at first. She would have been a nice friend for these girls. I never quite understood why she suddenly took to cutting us dead, and Mrs. Beckley left off asking us to the house, when they had asked us so often and we seemed real *friends*. I have sometimes thought of asking her. I am sure there is a misunderstanding, which could be cleared up."

The Vicar grew a trifle red. "You will not do anything of the sort," he said. "If the Beckleys can do without us we can do very well without them."

"You used to be so fond of Vera, Albert," said Mrs. Mercer reflectively, "and she of you. You often used to say it was like having a daughter of your own. I wonder what it *was* that made her turn like that."

"We were deceived in her, that was all," said Albert, who had recovered his equanimity. "She is not a nice girl. A clergyman has opportunities of finding out these things, and——"

"Oh, then there *was* something that you knew about, and that you haven't told me."

"I don't wish to be cross-examined, Gertrude. You must be content to leave alone the things that belong to my office. None of the Beckleys shall ever darken my doors again. Let that be enough. If we have to meet them sometimes at the Abbey we can be polite to them without letting it go any further. There are really very few people hereabouts whom I should like to see the Graftons make friends with, and scarcely any young ones. Denis Cooper is a thoughtful well-conducted young fellow, but he is to be ordained at Advent and I suppose he will not be here much. Rhoda and Ethel are nice girls too. I think a friendship might well be encouraged there. It would be pleasant for them to have a nice house like Abington to go to, and their seriousness might be a good thing for the Grafton girls, who I should think would be likely to be

affected by their father's evident wealth. It is a temptation I should like to see them preserved from."

"Rhoda and Ethel are a little old for them."

"So much the better. Yes; that is a friendship that I think might be helpful to both parties, and I shall do my best to encourage it. I should like to see the Grafton girls thoroughly intimate at Surley Rectory before Mrs. Carruthers comes back. She has behaved so badly to the Coopers that she would be quite likely to prevent it if she were here, out of spite."

"Well, I must stand up a *little* for Mrs. Carruthers," said Mrs. Mercer. "Rhoda and Ethel are good girls, I know, and do a lot of useful work in the parish, but they do like to dominate everything and everybody, and it was hardly to be expected that Mrs. Carruthers in her position would stand it."

"I don't agree with you at all," said her husband. "She was a mere girl when she married and came to live at Surley Park; she is hardly more than a girl now. She ought to have been thankful to have their help and advice, as they had practically run the parish for years. Actually to tell them to mind their own business, and practically to turn them out of her house, over that affair of her laundry maid—well, I don't say what I think about it, but I am *entirely* on the side of Rhoda and Ethel; and so ought you to be."

"Well, I know they acted for the best; but after all they *had* made a mistake. The young man hadn't come after the laundry maid at all."

"So it was said; but we needn't discuss it. They were most forgiving, and prepared to be all that was kind and sympathetic when Mrs. Carruthers lost her husband; and how did she return it? Refused to see them, just as she refused to see me when I called on Cooper's behalf—and in my priestly capacity too. No, Gertrude, there is nothing to be said on behalf of Mrs. Carruthers. She is a selfish worldly young woman, and her bereavement, instead of inclining her towards a quiet and sober life, seems to have had just the opposite effect. A widow of hardly more than two years, she goes gadding about all over the place, and behaves just as if her husband's death were a release to her instead of——"

"Well, I must say that I think it *was* rather a release, Albert. Mr. Carruthers had everything to make life happy, as you have often said, but drink was his curse, and if he had not been killed he might have spoilt her life for her. You said that too, you know, at the time."

"Perhaps I did. I was terribly upset at the time of the accident. It seemed so dreadful for a mere girl to be left widowed in that way, and I was ready to give her all the sympathy and help I could. But she would have none of it, and turned out hard and unfeeling, instead of being softened by the blow that had been dealt her, as a good woman would have been. She might have reformed her husband, but she did nothing of the sort; and now, as I say, she behaves as if there was nothing to do in the world except spend money

and enjoy one's self. She would be a bad influence for these young girls that are coming here, and I hope they will not have too much to do with her. If we can get them interested in good things instead of amusements, we shall only be doing our duty. Not that healthy amusement is to be deprecated by any means. It isn't our part to be kill-joys. But with ourselves as their nearest neighbours, and nice active girls like the Coopers not far off, and one or two more, they will have a very pleasant little society, and in fact we ought all to be very happy together."

"Yes. It *is* nice looking forward to having neighbours that we can be friends with. I do hope nothing will happen to make it awkward."

"Why should anything happen to make it awkward? We don't know much about the Graftons yet, but they seem to be nice people. At any rate we can assume that they are, until it is proved to the contrary. That is only Christian. Just because so many of the people round us are not what they should be is no reason why these new-comers shouldn't be."

"Oh, I am sure they are nice. I think I should rather like to go and tell Mrs. Walter and Mollie about them, Albert. It will be delightful for *them* to have people at the Abbey—especially for Mollie, who has so few girl friends."

"We might go over together," said the Vicar. "There are one or two little things I want Mollie to do for me. Yes, it will be nice for her, if the Grafton girls turn out what they should be. We shall have to

give the Walters a little advice. They haven't been used to the life of large houses. I think they ought to go rather slow at first."

"Oh, Mollie is such a dear girl, and has been well brought up. I don't think she would be likely to make any mistakes."

"I don't know that she would. But I shall talk to her about it. She is a dear girl, as you say. I look upon her almost as a daughter, though she has been here such a short time. I should like her to acquit herself well. She will, I'm sure, if she realises that this new chance for making friends comes through us. Yes, let us go over to the cottage, Gertrude. It is early yet. We can ask Mrs. Walter for a cup of tea."

CHAPTER V

SETTLING IN

The Abbey was ready for occupation early in April. Caroline, Barbara, and Miss Waterhouse went down on Monday, Grafton followed on Friday for the week-end and took Beatrix with him. She had announced that the dear boy couldn't be left by himself in London, or he'd probably get into mischief, and she was going to stay and look after him. As she had thought of it first, she had her way. Beatrix generally did get her way, though she never made herself unpleasant about it. Nor did she ever wheedle, when a decision went against her, though she could wheedle beautifully.

If any one of the three girls could be said to be spoilt, it was Beatrix. She had been frail as a child, with a delicate loveliness that had put even Caroline's beauty into the shade, although Caroline, with her sweet grey eyes and her glowing health, had been a child of whom any parents might have been inordinately proud. The young mother had never quite admitted her second child to share in the adoration she felt for her first-born, but Beatrix had twined herself round her father's heart, and had always kept first place in it, though not so much as to make his slight preference apparent. As a small child, she was more clinging than

the other two, and flattered his love and sense of protection. As she grew older she developed an unlooked-for capriciousness. When she was inclined to be sweet and loving she was more so than ever; but sometimes she would hardly suffer even a kiss, and had no caresses for anybody. She often hurt her father in this way, especially in the early days of his bereavement, but he was so equable by nature that he would dismiss her contrariety with a smile, and turn to Caroline, who always gave him what he wanted. As the children grew older he learnt to protect himself against Beatrix's inequalities of behaviour by a less caressing manner with them. It was for them to come to him for the signs and tokens of love, and it was all the sweeter to him when they did so. Even now, when she was grown up, it thrilled him when Beatrix was in one of her affectionate moods. She was not the constant invariable companion to him that Caroline was, and their minds did not flow together as his and Caroline's did. But he loved her approaches, and felt more pleased when she offered him companionship than with any other of his children. Thus, those who advance and withdraw have an unfair advantage over those who never change.

Caroline and Barbara met them in the big car which had been bought for station work at Abington. It was a wild wet evening, but they were snug enough inside, Caroline and Barbara sitting on either side of their father, and Beatrix on one of the let-down seats. Beatrix was never selfish; although she liked to have

her own way she seldom took it at the expense of others. She had had her father's sole companionship, and it was only fair that she should yield her place to her younger sister. So she did so of her own accord.

Caroline and Barbara were full of news. "Everything is ready for you, darling," said Caroline, her arm tucked into his. "You'll feel quite at home directly you get into the house; and there are very few more arrangements to make. We've been working like slaves, and all the servants too."

"The Dragon has had a headache, but she has done more than anybody," said Barbara. "It's all perfectly lovely, Daddy. We do like being country people awfully. We went down to the village in the rain this afternoon—the Dragon and all. That made me feel it, you know."

"It made us feel it, when you stepped into a puddle and splashed us all over," said Caroline. "George dear, we've had callers already."

"That ought to have cheered you up," said Grafton. "Who were they?"

"All clerical. I think Lord Salisbury put them on to us. He wants us to be in with the clergy."

"What do you mean? Lord Salisbury!"

"The Reverend Salisbury Mercer. I called him that first," said Barbara. "He likes us. He's been in and out, and given us a lot of advice. He likes me especially. He looked at me with a loving smile and said I was a sunbeam."

"We had Mr. Cooper, Rector of Surley, and his

two daughters," said Caroline. "He is a dear old thing and keeps bees. The two daughters look rather as if they had been stung by them. They are very officious, but sweeter than honey and the honeycomb at present. They said it was nice to have girls living in a house near them again; they hadn't had any for some years—I should think it must be about thirty, but they didn't say that. They said they hoped we should see a good deal of one another."

"I *don't* think," said Beatrix. "Who were the others?"

"Mr. and Mrs. Williams, Vicar and Vicaress of I've forgotten what. They were quite nice. Genial variety."

"The Breezy Bills we called them," said Barbara. "They almost blew us out of the house. He carpenters, and she breeds Airedales, and shows them. She brought one with her—a darling of a thing. They've promised us a puppy and a kennel to put it in already."

"You didn't ask her for one, did you?" asked Grafton. "If she breeds them for show we ought to offer to pay for it."

"Oh, you're going to *pay* for it all right, darling. You needn't worry about that. The kennel too. But you're going to get that for the cost of the wood and the paint. He isn't going to charge anything for his time. He laughed heartily when he said that. I like the Breezy Bills. They're going to take us out otter hunting when the time comes."

"A Mrs. Walter and her daughter came," said Caro-

line. "At least they were brought by the Mercers. They live in a little house at the top of the village. Rather a pretty girl, and nice, but shy. I wanted to talk to her and see what she was like, but Lord Salisbury wouldn't let me—at least not without him. George darling, I'm afraid you'll have to cope with Lord Salisbury. He's screwing in frightfully. I think he has an idea of being the man about the house when you're up in London. He asked how often you'd be down, and said we could always go and consult him when you were away. He came directly after breakfast yesterday with a hammer and some nails, to hang pictures."

"The Dragon sent him away," said Barbara. "She was rather splendid—extremely polite to him, but a little surprised. She doesn't like him. She won't say so, but I know it by her manner. I went in with her, and it was then that he called me a sunbeam. He said he did so want to make himself useful, and wasn't there *anything* he could do. I said he might dust the drawing-room if he liked."

"Barbara!"

"Well, I said it to myself."

"What is Mrs. Mercer like?" asked Beatrix.

"Oh, a nice little thing," said Caroline. "But very much under the thumb of Lord Salisbury. I think he leads her a dance. If we have to keep him off a little, we must be careful not to offend her. I think she must have rather a dull time of it. She's quite harmless, and wants to be friends."

"We mustn't quarrel with the fellow," said Grafton. "Haven't you seen Worthing?"

"*Have* we seen Worthing!" exclaimed Barbara. "He's a lamb. He's been away, but he came back yesterday afternoon, and rolled up directly. The Dragon likes him. He was awfully sweet to her. He's going to buy us some horses. You don't mind, do you, Daddy? I know you've got lots of money."

"That's where you make the mistake," said Grafton, "but of course we must have a gee or two. I want to talk to Worthing about that. Did you ask him to dine to-night, Cara?"

"Yes. He grinned all over. He said we were a boon and a blessing to men. He really loves us."

"And we love him," said Barbara. "We were wondering when the time would come to call him Jimmy. We feel like that towards him. Or, Dad darling, it *is* topping living in the country. Don't let's ever go back to London."

All the circumstances of life had been so much at Grafton's disposal to make what he liked out of them that he had become rather difficult to move to special pleasure by his surroundings. But he felt a keen sense of satisfaction as he entered this beautiful house that he had bought, and the door was shut on the wild and windy weather. That sensation, of a house as a refuge, is only to be gained in full measure in the country, whether it is because the house stands alone against the elements, or that the human factor in it counts for more than in a town. There was the quiet old stone-

built hall cheered by the fire of logs on the great hearth, the spacious soft-carpeted staircase and corridors, the long gallery transformed by innumerable adjustments into the very shrine of companionable home life, and all around the sense of completeness and fitness and beauty which taste and a sufficiency of wealth can give to a house built in the days when building was the expression of ideas and aspirations, and an art as creative and interpretative as any.

He felt positively happy as he dressed in the large comfortable, but not over luxurious room that Caroline had chosen for him. He had expressed no preferences on the subject when they had gone over the house together, but remembered now that he had rather liked this particular room out of the score or so of bedrooms they had gone through. It looked out on to the quiet little space of lawn and the trees beyond from three windows, and would get the first of the sun. He loved the sun, and Caroline knew that. She knew all his minor tastes, perhaps better than he knew them himself. He would have been contented with a sunny room and all his conveniences around him, or so he would have thought. But she had seen that he had much more than that. The old furniture which had struck him pleasantly on their first visit was there—the big bed with its chintz tester, the chintz-covered sofa, the great wardrobe of polished mahogany—everything that had given the room its air of solid old-fashioned comfort, and restful, rather faded charm. But the charm and the comfort seemed to have been heightened. The

slightly faded air had given place to one of freshness. The change was not so great as to bring a sense of modernity to unbalance the effect of the whole, but only to make it more real. Caroline was a genius at this sort of expression, and her love and devotion towards him had stimulated her. The freshness had come from the fact that she had changed all the chintzes, and the carpet and curtains, ransacking the house for the best she could find for the purpose. She had changed some of the furniture too, and added to it. Also the prints. He did recognise that change, as he looked around him, and took it all in. He was fond of old prints, and had noticed those that were of any value as he had gone through the rooms. There had been rubbish mixed with the good things in this room; but there was none left. "Good child!" he said to himself with satisfaction as he saw what she had done in this way.

He thought of her and his other children as he dressed, and he thought of his young wife. A charming crayon portrait of her hung in the place of honour above the mantelpiece, on which there were also photographs of her, and of the children, in all stages of their growth. Caroline had collected them from all over the London house. The crayon portrait had been one of two done by a very clever young artist, now a famous one, whom they had met on their honeymoon. This had been the first, and Grafton had thought it had not done justice to his wife's beauty; so the artist, with a smiling shrug of the shoulders, had offered to do another one, which had pleased him much better, and had hung

ever since in his bedroom in London. Now, as he looked at this portrait, which had hung in a room he seldom went into, he wondered how he could have been so blind. The beauty, with which he had fallen in love, was there, but the artist had seen much more than the beauty that was on the surface. It told immeasurably more about the sweet young bride than the picture he had made of her afterwards. It told something of what she would be when the beauty of form and feature and colouring should have waned, of what she would have been to-day more than twenty years later.

Grafton was not a man who dwelt on the past, and his life had been too prosperous and contented to lead him to look forward very often to the future. He took it as it came, and enjoyed it, without hugging himself too much on the causes of his enjoyment. The only unhappiness he had ever known had been in the loss of his wife, but the wound had healed gradually, and had now ceased to pain him.

But it throbbed a little now as he looked at the portrait with new eyes. He and she had talked together of a country house some time in the future of their long lives together—some such house as this, if they should wait until there was enough money. It was just what she would have delighted in. She had been brought up in a beautiful country house, and loved it. Caroline inherited her fine perceptions and many of her tastes from her. It would have been very sweet to have had her companionship now, in this pleasant and even ex-

citing life that was opening up before them. They would all have been intensely happy together.

He turned away with a faint frown of perplexity. She would have been a middle-aged woman now, the mother of grown-up daughters. To think of her like that was to think of a stranger. His old wound had throbbed because he had caught a fresh glimpse of her as the young girl he had so loved, and loved still, for she had hardly been more than a girl when she had died. He supposed he would have gone on loving her just the same; his love for her had grown no less during the short years of their married life; he had never wanted anybody else, and had never wanted anybody else since, remembering what she had been. But it was an undoubted fact that husbands and wives in middle-age had usually shed a good deal of their early love, or so it seemed to him, from his experience of married men of his own age. Would it have been so with him? He couldn't think it, but he couldn't tell. To him she would always be what she had been, even when he grew old. It was perplexing to think of her as growing old too; and there was no need to do so.

The years had passed very quickly. Caroline had been only five when she had died, Beatrix three, and Barbara a baby. And now the two elder were grown up, and Barbara nearly so. It came home to him, as he looked at their photographs on the mantelpiece, how pleasant they had made life for him, and how much he still had in his home in spite of the blank that his wife's death had made. This puzzled him a little too. He

thought he ought to have missed her more, and be missing her more now. But introspection was not his habit, and the hands of the clock on the mantelpiece were progressing towards the dinner hour. He dressed quickly, with nothing in his mind but pleasurable anticipation of the evening before him.

Worthing was in the morning-room talking to Caroline when he went downstairs. He looked large and beaming and well washed and brushed. The greeting between the two men was cordial. Each had struck a chord in the other, and it was plain that before long they would be cronies. Worthing was outspoken in his admiration of what had been done with the house.

"I've been telling this young lady," he said, "that I wouldn't have believed it possible. Nothing seems to be changed, and yet everything seems to be changed. Look at this room now! It's the one that Brett used to occupy, and it used to give me a sort of depressed feeling whenever I came into it. Now it's a jolly room to come into. You *know*, somehow, that when you go out of it, you're going to get a good dinner."

He laughed with a full throat. Caroline smiled and looked round the room, which had been transformed by her art from the dull abode of a man who cared nothing for his surroundings into something that expressed home and contentment and welcome.

Grafton put his arm around her as they stood before the fire. "She's a wonder at it," he said. "She's done all sorts of things to my room upstairs. I felt at home in it at once."

She smiled up at him and looked very pleased. He did not always notice the things she did out of love for him.

The other two girls came in with Miss Waterhouse. Beatrix looked enchanting in a black frock which showed up the loveliness of her delicate colouring and scarcely yet matured contours. Worthing almost gasped as he looked at her, and then shook hands, but recovered himself to look at the three of them standing before him. "Now how long do you suppose you're going to keep these three young women at home?" he asked genially, as old Jarvis came in to announce dinner.

They were all as merry as possible over the dinner-table. Beatrix made them laugh with her account of the house in London as run by herself with a depleted staff. She was known not to be domestically inclined and made the most of her own deficiencies, while not sparing the servants who had been left behind. But she dealt with them in such a way that old Jarvis grinned indulgently at her recital, and the two new footmen who had been engaged for the Abbey each hoped that it might fall to his lot some day to take the place of their colleague who had been left behind.

Worthing enjoyed himself immensely. All three of the girls talked gaily and freely, and seemed bubbling over with laughter and good spirits. Their father seemed almost as young as they were, in the way he laughed and talked with them. Miss Waterhouse took little part in the conversation, but smiled appreciatively on each in turn, and was never left out of it. As for

himself, he was accepted as one of themselves, and initiated into all sorts of cryptic allusions and humours, such as a laughter-loving united and observant family gathers round about its speech. He became more and more avuncular as the meal progressed, and at last Barbara, who was sitting next to him, said: "You know, I think we must call you Uncle Jimmy, if you don't mind. It seems to fit you, and we do like things that fit, in this family."

He accepted the title with enthusiasm. "I've got nephews and nieces all over the place," he said. "But the more the merrier. I'm a first-class uncle, and never forget anybody at Christmas."

They began to discuss people. A trifle of criticism, hardly to be called malice, crept into the conversation. Miss Waterhouse found it necessary to say: "Barbara darling, I don't think you should get into the way of always calling the Vicar Lord Salisbury. You might forget and do it before somebody who would repeat it to him."

"I think he'd like it," said Caroline. "I'm sure he loves a lord."

Worthing sat and chuckled as an account was given of the visits of the 'Breezy Bills,' and the Misses Cooper, who were given the name of 'the Zebras,' partly owing to their facial conformation, partly to the costumes they had appeared in. He brought forward no criticism himself, and shirked questions that would have led to any on his part, but he evidently had no objection to it as spicing conversation, and freed

himself from the slight suspicion of being a professional peacemaker. "He's an old darling," Barbara said of him afterwards. "I really believe he likes everybody, including Lord Salisbury."

When the two men were left alone together, Worthing said: "You've got one of the nicest families I ever met, Grafton. They'll liven us up here like anything. Lord, what a boon it is to have this house opened up again!"

"They're a cheery lot," said Grafton. "You'll like the boy too, I think. He'll be home soon now. I suppose there are some people about for them all to play with. I hardly know anybody in this part of the world."

"There are some of the nicest people you'd meet anywhere," said Worthing. "They'll all be coming to call directly. Oh, yes, we're very fortunate in that way. But yours is the only house quite near. It'll mean a lot to me, I can tell you, to have the Abbey lived in again, 'specially with those nice young people of yours."

"How far off is Wilborough? You go there a lot, don't you?"

"Oh, yes, I do. I look after the place, as you know, and old Sir Alexander likes to have me pottering about with him. You'll like the old boy. He's seventy, but he's full of fun. Good man on a horse too, though he suffers a lot from rheumatism. Wilborough? It's about two miles from me; about three from here."

"What's Lady Mansergh like? Wasn't she——"

"Well, yes, she was; but it's a long time ago. No-

body remembers anything about it. Charming old woman, with a heart of gold."

"Old woman! I thought she was years younger than him, and still kept her golden hair and all that sort of thing."

"Well, yes, she does. Wouldn't thank you for calling her old, either. And I don't suppose she's much over fifty. But she's put on flesh. That sort of women does, you know, when they settle down. Extraordinary how they take to it all, though. She used to hunt when I first came here. Rode jolly straight too. And anybody'd think she'd lived in the country all her life. Well, I suppose she has, the best part of it. Dick must be twenty-eight or nine, I should think, and Geoffrey about twenty-five. Nice fellows, both of them."

"Mercer told me, that second time I came down, that they weren't proper people for the children to know."

A shade crossed Worthing's expansive face. "Of course a parson has different ideas about things," he said. "She did divorce her first husband, it's true; but he was a rotter of the worst type. There was never anything against her. She was before our time, but a fellow told me that when she was on the stage she was as straight as they make 'em, though lively and larky. All I can say is that if your girls were mine I shouldn't object to their knowing her."

"Oh, well, that's enough for me. They probably won't want to be bosom friends. It would be awkward, though, having people about that one didn't want to

know. According to Mercer, there aren't many people about here that one *would* want to know, except a few parsons and their families. He seems to have a down on the lot of them."

"Well, between you and me," said Worthing confidentially, "I shouldn't take much notice of what Mercer says, if I were you. He's a nice enough fellow, but he does seem, somehow, to get at loggerheads with people. I wouldn't say anything against the chap behind his back, but you'd find it out for yourself in time. You'll see everybody there is, and you can judge for yourself."

"Oh, yes, I can do that all right. Let's go and play bridge. The girls are pretty good at it."

CHAPTER VI

VISITORS

Mrs. Walter and Mollie were at their mid-day Sunday dinner. Stone Cottage, where they lived, stood at the top of the village street. It had a fair-sized drawing-room and a little bandbox of a dining-room, with three bedrooms and an attic, and a garden of about half an acre. Its rent was under thirty pounds a year, and it was as nice a little country home as a widow lady with a very small income and her daughter could wish for.

Mrs. Walter's husband had been a schoolmaster. He was a brilliant scholar and would certainly have risen high in his profession. But he had died within two years of their marriage, leaving her almost unprovided for. She had the income from an insurance policy of a thousand pounds and he had left the manuscript of a schoolbook, which was to have been the first of many such. One of his colleagues had arranged for its publication on terms not as favourable as they should have been, but it had brought her in something every year, and its sales had increased until now they produced a respectable yearly sum. For twenty years she had acted as matron in one of the boarding-houses

of the school at which her husband had been assistant master. It had been a hard life, and she was a delicate woman, always with the fear before her of losing her post before she could save enough to live on and keep Mollie with her. The work, for which she was not well suited, had tried her, and it was with a feeling of immense relief and thankfulness that she at last reached the point at which she could give it up, and live her own quiet life with her daughter. She could not, in fact, have gone on with it much longer, and kept what indifferent health she had; and looking back she was inclined to wonder how she had stood it for so long. Every morning that she woke up in her quiet little cottage brought a blissful sense of relief at being free from all the stress and worry of that uncongenial life, and no place she could have found to live in would have been too quiet and retired for her.

She was a thin colourless woman, with whatever good looks she may have had in her youth washed out of her by ill-health and an anxious life. But Mollie was a pretty girl, soft and round and dimpled, and wanting only encouragement to break into merriment and chatter. She needed a good deal of encouragement, though. She was shy, and diffident about herself. Her mother had kept her as retired as possible from the busy noisy boys' life by which they had been surrounded. The housemaster and his wife had not been sympathetic to either of them. They were snobs, and had daughters of their own, not so pretty as Mollie, nor so nice. There had been slights, which had extended themselves to the

day school at which she had been educated. During the two years before they had settled down at Abington she had been at a school in Paris, first as a pupil, then as a teacher. She had gained her French, but not much in the way of self-confidence. She too was pleased enough to live quietly in the country; she had had quite enough of living in a crowd. And Abington had been delightful to them, not only from the pleasure they had from the pretty cottage, all their own, but from the beauty of the country, and from the kindness with which they had been received by the Vicar and Mrs. Mercer, who had given them an intimacy which had not come into their lives before. For Mrs. Walter had dropped out from among her husband's friends, and had made no new ones as long as she had remained at the school.

"You know, dear," Mollie was saying, "I rather dreaded going to the Abbey. I thought they might be sniffy and stuck up. But they're not a bit. I do think they are three of the nicest girls I've ever met, Mother. Don't you?"

"Yes, I think they are very nice," said Mrs. Walter. "But you must be a little careful. I think that is what the Vicar's warning meant."

"What, Mother?"

"Well, you know he said that you should be careful about going there too much—never without a special invitation. He is so kind and thoughtful for us that I think he must have feared that they might perhaps take you up at first, as you are the only girl in the

place besides themselves, and then drop you. In many ways their life is so different from what ours can be that there might be a danger of that, though I don't think they would do it consciously."

"Oh, no; they're much too nice for that. Still, of course, I should hate to feel that I was poking myself in. Don't you think I might go to tea this afternoon, Mother? Caroline did ask me, you know, and I'm sure she meant it."

Mollie had been to church alone that morning, and the Grafton girls had taken her round the garden of the Abbey afterwards.

"I don't know what to say," said Mrs. Walter, hesitatingly. "I can't help wishing you had waited for the Vicar and Mrs. Mercer afterwards, and walked back with them, as we generally do."

"It would have been so difficult to refuse. They introduced me to Beatrix and to Mr. Grafton, and they were all so nice, and seemed to take it for granted that I should go with them. I thought perhaps the Vicar and Mrs. Mercer would have come over too. He likes them so much, and says they make him feel so at home there. He has helped them a lot getting into order."

"He is one of those men who likes to help everybody," said Mrs. Walter. "Nobody could possibly have been kinder to *us* than he has been, from the beginning. We are very fortunate indeed to have found such a nice clergyman here. It might have been so different. We must be especially careful not to give

him the *slightest* reason to think that he doesn't come first with us."

"Oh, of course, he and Mrs. Mercer would always be our chief friends here. But you see, Mother dear, I've had so few girl friends, and I think these really might be. I love them all, especially Beatrix. She's sweet, and I believe she'd like to be friends. When I said I must ask you first, she said you couldn't possibly object, and I *must* come."

"Well, dear, of course, you could, in the ordinary way. But you know we nearly always go to tea at the Vicarage on Sunday afternoons. If you had walked home with them they would have been sure to ask you. I expect the Vicar will, at Sunday-school this afternoon. Wouldn't it look ungracious if you said you were going somewhere else?"

Poor Mollie could not deny that it might, but looked so downcast that her mother suggested waiting to see if the Vicar did ask her, but without suggesting that she should accept the invitation if he did.

Mollie was a good girl, and had the reward which does not always attend goodness. She made up her mind that it would not be right to forsake old friends for new ones, that she would walk back with the Vicar after Sunday-school as usual, and if by some fortunate chance he omitted to ask her and her mother to tea she would then go to the Abbey.

The Vicar came out as she passed his house with his Bible in his hand. "Well, Mollie," he said. "What

became of you after church this morning? I hope your mother isn't unwell."

"She didn't sleep well last night, and I made her stay in bed," said Mollie. "But she's up now."

She expected that the Vicar's invitation would then be forthcoming, but he said nothing.

She waited for him after school as he liked her to do, but as he came out he said: "Well, I suppose you're going home now, dear." He had dropped into the way of calling her dear within a short time of their arrival, and she liked it. She had never known her own father, nor any man who used protecting or affectionate speech towards her. "I must wait for Mrs. Mercer. We are going to the Abbey together."

Mollie was vastly relieved. "Oh, then, perhaps we can go together," she said. "They asked me this morning."

He did not look so pleased as she had thought he would, for he had always shown himself ready for her company, wherever it might be, and had told her more than once that he didn't know what he had done for company before she came. "They asked you, did they?" he said. "Didn't they ask your mother too?"

"No. I went over with them after church. It was the girls who asked me."

"Did they ask you to go over with them after church?"

"Oh, yes. I shouldn't have gone without an invitation. I remembered what you had said."

"But I hope you didn't hang about as if you were

looking for one. You know, Mollie, you must be very careful about that sort of thing. If these girls turn out to be thoroughly nice, as I quite hope they will, it will be nice for you to go to the Abbey sometimes. It will make a change in your life. But you see you haven't mixed with that sort of people before, and I am very anxious that you shan't make mistakes. I would rather you went there first with me—or Mrs. Mercer."

Mollie felt some offence at it being supposed possible that she should hang about for an invitation. But she knew that men were like that—clumsy in their methods of expression; they meant nothing by it. And it was kind of him to take this interest in her behalf.

"Thank you," she said. "Of course I should be careful not to go unless they really wanted me. But I'm sure they did by the way they asked me. If you and Mrs. Mercer are going too that will be all the better."

"Ought you to leave your mother alone?" he asked. "I quite thought you had hurried back to her this morning. If she isn't well, it was a little thoughtless, wasn't it, Mollie, to stay behind like that? She might have been worrying herself as to what had become of you."

"Oh, no," she said artlessly. "She would have thought I was with you. I have once or twice been to the Vicarage after church when she has stayed at home. And she didn't mind my going this afternoon a bit."

Mrs. Mercer was seen bearing down upon them. "Oh

well," he said, not very graciously, "I suppose you had better come. But you mustn't let the attentions of the girls at the Abbey turn your head, Mollie; and above all you mustn't get into the way of leaving your mother to be with them. They have asked Mollie to tea," he said as his wife came up. "So we can all go together."

"Oh, I'm so glad," said Mrs. Mercer. "I thought you might wonder, dear, why we hadn't asked you and Mrs. Walter to the Vicarage this afternoon. But you see, Mr. Grafton is only here on Saturdays and Sundays, and the Vicar has a good many things to talk over with him; so we thought we'd invite ourselves to tea there—at least, go there, rather early, and if they like to ask us to stay to tea, well they can."

"Really, my dear!" expostulated the Vicar, "you put things in a funny way. It's no more for people like ourselves to drop in at a house like the Abbey and ask for a cup of tea than to go to Mrs. Walter, for instance."

"No, dear, of course not," said Mrs. Mercer soothingly.

They went into the park through the hand gate, and when they had got a little way along the path an open motor-car passed them a little way off on the road. It was driven by a girl in a big tweed coat, and another girl similarly attired sat by her. Behind were an old lady and gentleman much befurred, and a third girl on the back seat.

"The Pembertons!" said the Vicar in a tone of

extreme annoyance. "Now what on earth do they want over here? They can't surely be coming to pay their first call on a Sunday, and I'm sure they haven't called already or I should have heard of it."

"Perhaps they are just going through the park," said Mrs. Mercer, which suggestion her husband accepted until they came in sight of the house and saw the empty car standing before it.

"Just like them to pay a formal call on a Sunday!" he said. "I'm very annoyed that this should have happened. I was going to give Grafton a warning about those people. They're not the sort of girls for his girls to know—loud and slangy and horsey! I abhor that sort of young woman. However, I suppose we shall have to be polite to them now they're here. But I don't want *you* to have anything to do with them, Mollie. I should keep in the background if I were you, as much as possible. And I dare say they won't stay very long."

They were taken up to the long gallery, which seemed to be full of talk as they entered it. It was a chilly windy day, and the two girls stood in front of one of the fires, of which there were two burning, while old Mr. and Mrs. Pemberton were sitting by the other. All four of them were talking at once, in loud clear voices, and there were also present, besides the Grafton family and Worthing, two young men, one of whom was talking louder than anybody.

The entrance of the Vicar had the effect of stopping the flow for a moment, but it was resumed again almost

immediately, and was never actually discontinued by the two young men, who were talking to Caroline, until she left them to greet the new arrivals.

"Ah, that's right; I'm glad you've come," said Grafton. "I suppose you know Mr. and Mrs. Pemberton. We've just discovered they're old friends of my wife's people."

"No, I don't think that we've ever met before," said Mrs. Pemberton, addressing herself to the Vicar, who stood awkwardly beside her. She had the air of not minding to whom she addressed herself as long as she was not asked to discontinue addressing somebody. "I suppose you're the clergyman here. It's been rather beyond our beat, you know, until we got the car, and, of course, there hasn't been anybody here for years. Nice to have the place occupied again, isn't it? Must make a lot of difference to you, I should think. And such nice people too! Yes, it's odd, isn't it? Mr. Francis Parry came to spend the week-end with us—my son brought him—and he asked us if we knew the Graftons who had just bought this place, and we said we didn't but were going to call on them when they'd got settled in; and then suddenly I remembered and said: 'Didn't one of the Graftons marry Lord Handsworth's sister, and she died?' Well, I've known the Handsworths ever since I was a girl, and that's a good many years ago, as you may imagine. You needn't trouble to contradict me, you know."

She looked up at him with a sharp smile. She was a hard-bitten old lady, with a face full of wrinkles in a

skin that looked as if it had been out in the sun and rain for years, as indeed it had, and a pair of bright searching eyes. The Vicar returned her smile. One would have said that she had already made a conquest of him, in spite of his previous disapprobation, and her having taken no particular pains to do so.

"Was Mrs. Grafton Lord Handsworth's sister?" he asked.

"Yes. Ain't I telling you so? Ruth Handsworth she was, but I don't think I ever knew her. She was of the second family, and I never saw much of the old man after he married again. Well, Francis Parry suggested walking over with my son. He's a friend of these people. So we thought we might as well drop ceremony and all come. Have you got a clothing-club in this village?"

In the meantime, on the other side of the fire-place, old Mr. Pemberton was giving his host some information about the previous inhabitants of the Abbey. He was rather deaf, and addressed his opponent in conversation as if his disability were the common lot of humankind, which probably accounted for the high vocal tone of the Pemberton family in general. "When I was a young fellow," he was saying, "there was no house in the neighb'r'ood more popular than this. There were four Brett girls, and all of them as pretty as paint. All we young fellows from twenty miles round and more were quarrelling about them. They all stuck together and wouldn't look at a soul of us—not for years—and then they all married in a bunch,

and not a single one of them into the county. I was in love with the eldest myself, but I was only a boy at Eton and she was twenty-four. If it had been the other way about we might have kept one of them. Good old times those were. The young fellows used to ride over here, or drive their dog-carts, which were just beginning to come in in those days, and those who couldn't afford horseflesh used to walk. There were one or two sporting parsons in the neighb'r'ood then, and some nice young fellows from the Rectories. Sir Charles Dawbarn, the judge—his father was rector of Feltham when I was a young fellow. He wanted to marry the second one, but she wouldn't look at him. Nice fellow he was too. They don't seem to send us the parsons they used to in the old days. We've got a fellow at Grays goes about in a cassock, just like a priest. Behaves like one too. Asked my wife when he first came if sh'd ever been to confession. Ha! ha! ha! She told him what she thought of him. But he's not a bad fellow, and we get on all right. What sort of a fellow have you got here? They can make themselves an infernal nuisance sometimes if they're not the right sort; and not many of them are nowadays, at least in these parts."

"That's our Vicar talking to Mrs. Pemberton," said Grafton in as low a voice as he thought would penetrate.

"Eh! What!" shouted the old man. "Gobbless my soul! Yes. I didn't notice he was a parson. Hope he didn't hear what I said. Hate to hurt anybody's

feelings. Let's get further away. I've had enough of this fire."

Miss Waterhouse was talking to Mrs. Mercer by one of the windows, and all the young people had congregated round the further fire-place. The two older men joined them, and presently there was a suggestion of going over the house to see what had been done with it.

Mollie found herself with Beatrix, who, as she told her mother afterwards, was very sweet to her, not allowing her to feel out of it, though there were so many people there, and she was the least important of all of them. She was not alone with Beatrix however. Bertie Pemberton stuck close to them, and took the leading part in the conversation, though Beatrix did her share, with a dexterous unflustered ability which Mollie, who said very little, could not but admire. She judged Bertie Pemberton to be immensely struck with Beatrix, and did not wonder at it. She herself was beginning to have that enthusiastic admiration for her which generous girls accord to others more beautiful and more gifted than themselves. Everything about Beatrix pleased her—her lovely face and delicious colouring, the grace of her young form, the way she did her hair, the way she wore her pretty clothes. And she was as 'nice' as she was beautiful, with no affectations about her, and no 'airs,' which she very well might have given herself, considering how richly she was endowed by nature and circumstance. That Bertie Pemberton seemed to admire her in much the same way as

Mollie herself disposed her to like him, though her liking was somewhat touched with awe, for he was of the sort of young man whom Mollie in her retired life had looked upon as of a superior order, with ways that would be difficult to cope with if chance should ever bring one of them into her own orbit. He was, in fact, a good-natured young man, employed temporarily with stocks and shares until he should succeed to the paternal acres, of the pattern of other young men who had received a conventionally expensive education and gained a large circle of acquaintances thereby, if no abiding interest in the classical studies which had formed its basis. He seemed to be well satisfied with himself, and indeed there was no reason why he should not have been, since so far there had been little that he had wanted in life which he had not obtained. If he should chance to want Beatrix in the near future, which Mollie, looking forward as she listened and observed, thought not unlikely, there might be some obstacles to surmount, but at this stage there was nothing to daunt him. He handled the situation in the way dictated by his temperament and experience, kept up a free flow of good-humoured chaff, and under cover of it expressed admiration that had to be fenced with, but never went beyond the point at which it would have been necessary for his satisfaction that a third party should not have been present. As Beatrix, with her arm in Mollie's, took pains to include her in the conversation, he couldn't ignore Mollie; nor did he appear to wish to do

so. She was a pretty girl too, and he was only using his ordinary methods with a pretty girl. If she would have found a difficulty in fencing with him in the manner he would have expected of her had they been alone together, she was spared the exercise, as Beatrix lightly took her defence on her own shoulders.

As Bertie Pemberton did not lower his voice below the family pitch, Mollie was a little anxious lest some of his speeches should come to the ear of the Vicar, who was not far removed from them as they started on their tour of investigation. He seemed, however, to have found an unexpected satisfaction in the society of Mrs. Pemberton, on whom he was in close attendance, with a back the contour of which expressed deference. She appeared to be giving him advice upon certain matters in connection with his own parish, and drawing upon his sympathy in matters connected with her own. Just before Bertie Pemberton managed to let the rest of the party get a room or two ahead, by showing great interest in the old books with which the library was furnished, Mollie heard her say to him in her carrying voice: "Well, you must come over and see it for yourself. I don't know why we've never met you; but Abington is rather beyond our beat, unless there's something or somebody to come for. It's such a pleasure to meet a sensible clergyman. I wish there were more of them."

Mollie was glad that her friend had impressed the loud-speaking rather formidable lady in this way, but was inclined to wonder what he would do with the invitation, for he knew what he thought of the Pember-

tons; and he had so often announced that he would have nothing whatever to do with such people, and was glad that they were so far away. She had heard the story of Bertie Pemberton's rudeness to him, but saw now how it might have been. Bertie's free manner might easily be taken for rudeness by somebody who did not know him. No doubt there had been 'faults on both sides.' She hoped that the Vicar's objections to the Pemberton family would not lead him to refuse them another chance. If there was no more harm in the Pemberton girls than there apparently was in their brother he would find that he had misjudged them.

The Pemberton girls—Nora, Effie and Kate—were cut out of the corresponding female pattern to their brother's. They were good-natured and well satisfied with themselves. But their self-satisfaction did not prevent them from taking a lively interest in other people, and their good-nature made them known to a large circle of acquaintances as 'good pals.' This reputation, though leading to much pleasant intercourse with members of either sex, is not the most favourable to matrimonial adjustments, and the youngest of them had already reached the middle twenties. But the shadow of spinsterhood had hardly yet begun to throw itself across their breezy path. With their horses and their golf, their visits to other country houses and sometimes to London, their father's large house, seldom entirely without guests in it, and above all their always increasing friendships, they had all that they wanted at present. Out of all

their 'pals' there would be some day one for each of them in whose company they would continue the lives that they now found so pleasant. Almost anybody would do, if he was a good pal and had enough money. Falling in love was outside their beat. But it was probable that if one of them ever did fall in love, the other two would follow her suit. They were human enough in their primitive instincts.

Barbara accompanied Nora and Kate. She took a keen interest in them as types new to her, and they thought her a bright and modest child whose tastes for a country life were worth cultivating. "You must hack about as much as you can till next season, and get used to it," said Kate. "Then we'll take you out cubbing, and by the time regular hunting begins you ought to be able to sit as tight as any of us. It isn't a tiptop country, but you can get a lot of fun out of it."

"Better than jogging about in the Park, anyhow," said Nora. "I wouldn't live in London if you paid me."

Effie Pemberton and Bertie's friend Francis Parry were conducted by Caroline. Francis was of the same type as Bertie—smooth-haired, well-dressed and self-confident, but on a quieter plane. He had been one of Caroline's regular dancing partners, had dined sometimes at the house in London, and stayed sometimes in the same houses in the country. She liked him, and had found him more interesting than most of the young men in whose company she had disported herself. He had

tastes somewhat similar to hers, and it was a pleasure to point out to him what she had done to the house, and to receive his commendation. Effie Pemberton, who would much rather have been looking over the stables, found herself rather *de trop*, and presently allied herself to Worthing, to whom she said with a jerk of the thumb: "I think it's a case there."

But it was not a case, at least as far as Caroline was concerned.

CHAPTER VII

YOUNG GEORGE

YOUNG GEORGE, commonly called Bunting, arrived home in the week before Easter. He was full of excitement at the new state of affairs, from which he anticipated a more enjoyable life than had hitherto fallen to his lot, though he had spent the greater part of his holidays either in the country houses of relations or in the country with his own family. But to have a home of one's own in the country, to which one could invite chosen friends, with a horse of one's own, kennel facilities, games to be found or invented immediately outside the premises, and all the sport that the country afforded ready to hand—this was far better than staying in other people's houses in the country, pleasant as that had been, and certainly far better than being confined to a house in London, which presented no attractions whatever except in the one item of plays to be seen.

He arrived just in time for lunch, and could hardly give himself time to eat it, so anxious was he to explore. He disappeared immediately afterwards, with Barbara, and was seen at intervals hurrying here and there during the afternoon, an active eager figure in his grey flannel suit and straw hat, and one upon which his elder sisters looked with pride and pleasure.

"It *is* jolly to have him," said Caroline, as he ran past them, sitting out in the garden, on his way towards the fish ponds, carrying a net for some purpose that seemed to him of the utmost importance for the moment, and accompanied by Barbara and four dogs.

"The darling!" said Beatrix affectionately. She and Caroline had done their best to spoil him since his earliest years, and were inclined to look upon him now as a pet and a plaything, though his independence of mind and habit somewhat discouraged the attitude.

He and Barbara put in an appearance at tea-time, rather warm, rather dishevelled, but entirely happy. They were going through one of those spells of weather which sometimes seem to have strayed from June into April, when leaf and bud are expanding almost visibly under the influence of the hot sun, and promise and fulfilment are so mixed that to turn from one to the other is to get one of the happiest sensations that nature affords. A broad gravel path ran alongside the southeast corner of the house, ending in a yew-enclosed space furnished with white-painted seats round a large table. Here tea was set in shelter from sun and wind, and within sight of some of the quiet beauty of the formal garden, which the gay-coloured flowers of spring were already turning into a place of delight. Even Young George, not yet of an age to be satisfied with horticultural beauty, said that it was jolly, as he looked round him after satisfying the first pangs of appetite, and did not immediately rush away to more

active pleasures when he had satisfied the remainder of them.

There was, indeed, a great deal to talk about, in the time that could be spared for talk. A great deal had to be told to this sympathetic bunch of sisters about his own experiences, and amusement to be extracted from them as to theirs.

Every family has its own chosen method of intercourse. That of the Graftons was to encourage one another to humour of observation and expression. When one or another of them was 'in form' they had as appreciative an audience among the rest as they could have gained from their warmest admirers outside. Young George occasionally gave bright examples of the sort of speech that was encouraged among them, and was generously applauded when he did so, not only because his sisters loved and admired him so much, but because it was gratifying to see him expanding to the pains they had taken with his education.

"There's a bloke near here who came last half," he said, when he had given them various pieces of intelligence which he thought might interest them. "His name's Beckley. I didn't know him very well till we came down in the train together, but he's rather a sportsman; he asked a ticket collector at Westhampton Junction to telegraph to his people that the train was late, but he hoped to be in time for his uncle's funeral. Do you know his people?"

"The Beckleys! Oh, yes, they live at Feltham Hall," said Caroline. "Mrs. Beckley and Vera called

last week, and the Dragon and I called back. Vera told me about Jimmy. They find him difficult to cope with. They don't adore him as much as we do you, Bunting."

"He doesn't adore *them* much," said Young George. "He told me that it was a bore having a lot of sisters, and he'd swop the lot for a twin brother."

"Odious little beast!" said Beatrix. "Why a *twin* brother?"

"Oh, because he says he's the nicest fellow himself that he knows, and he'd like to have somebody of the same sort to do things with. He's really a comic bloke. I'm sure you'll like him. I expect he'll be over here pretty often. I don't suppose he really meant it about his sisters."

"Then he oughtn't to have said it, just for the sake of being funny," said Caroline. "I hope you weren't led into saying that yours were a bore, Bunting."

"No," said Young George. "I said you weren't bad sorts, and I thought he'd like you all right when he saw you. He said he'd come over some time and make an inspection."

"We'll inspect *him* when he does come," said Barbara. "The Beckley girls are rather bread and buttery. They've got pigtails and a Mademoiselle, and go for walks in the country. The Dragon and I met them once, and we had a little polite conversation before they agreed to go their way and we went ours."

"Barbara dear, I don't think you should get into the way of criticising everybody," said Miss Water-

house. "I thought they were particularly nice girls."

"Yes, darling, you would," said Barbara. "If I wore a pigtail and said *au revoir* instead of good-bye, you'd think I was a particularly nice girl. But I'm sure you wouldn't love me as much as you do."

"Vera isn't bread and buttery," said Caroline, "though she's rather quiet. Jimmy seems to have all the high spirits of the family. I told her we'd deal with him if she sent him over here. We'd broken Bunting in, and we'd break him in for her."

"Any other nice people about to play with?" asked Bunting. "I suppose you've got to know them all now."

"I wrote to you about the Breezy Bills and the Zebras, and Lord Salisbury," said Barbara. "I wonder Lord Salisbury isn't here. He generally looks in about tea-time,—or lunch-time, or dinner-time."

"Barbara darling, you mustn't get into the way of exaggerating," said Miss Waterhouse.

"And I told you about Francis Parry bringing the Pembertons over," said Caroline, "and about Bertie taking a fancy to B."

"Beautiful bountiful Bertie!" said Young George, by way of comment.

"He came over again," said Beatrix, "and wanted to lay out golf links for us. He said he should be down for a week at Easter and it would give him something to do. I am sure he is an admirer—the first I've had. Bunting darling, I'm really grown up at last."

"You'll have lots more, old girl," said Young George loyally. "Now I'm getting on a bit myself, and see other fellows' sisters, I can tell you you're a good-looking crowd. Barbara's the most plain-headed, but she's better than the average. She only wants a bit of furnishing out. Who else have you seen?"

"Lady Mansergh from Wilborough," said Caroline. "We think she must have a past, because her hair is so very golden, and she speaks with a slight Cockney accent."

"And because Lord Salisbury disapproves of her," added Beatrix.

"Lord Salisbury disapproves of everybody," said Barbara. "He wants to keep us to himself. I'm his little sunbeam, you know, Bunting. I'm going to help decorate the church for Easter."

"We are all going to do that," said Miss Waterhouse, "and Mr. Mercer is quite justified in asking for that sort of help from us. You should not get into the way of criticising everything he does, Barbara darling."

"She always sticks up for him, because she can't abide him," said Barbara. "I liked Lady Mansergh. She was very affectionate. She patted my cheek and said it did her good to see such nice pretty girls about the place. She said it to me, so you see, Bunting, I'm not so plain-headed as you think. If ever Caroline and B are removed, by marriage or death, you'll see how I shall shine."

"Barbara dear, don't talk about death in that unfeeling way," said Miss Waterhouse. "It is not pretty at all."

Old Jarvis came out of the house at that moment followed by the Vicar, whom he announced by name as solemnly as if he had never seen him before. Jarvis did not like the Vicar, and adopted towards him an air of impregnable respect, refusing to be treated as a fellow human being, and giving monosyllabic answers to his attempts at conversation as he preceded him in stately fashion on his numerous calls to the morning-room, which was seldom used except just before dinner, or the drawing-room, which was never used at all. From the first he had never permitted him "just to run up and find the young ladies," or to dispense with any formality that he could bind him to, though Worthing he always received with a smiling welcome, accepted and returned his words of greeting, and took him straight up to the long gallery if the family was there, or told him if they were in the garden. The morning-room opened into the garden, and the Vicar, hearing voices outside, had followed him out. Jarvis was extremely annoyed with himself that he had not shown him into the drawing-room, which was on the other side of the house, but did not allow his feelings to appear.

The Vicar came forward with an air of proprietary friendship. "Tea out of doors in April!" he said. "What an original family you are, to be sure! Ah, my young friend, I think I can guess who *you* are."

"Young George, commonly known as Bunting," said

Barbara by way of introduction. None of them ever showed him what desolation his visits brought them, and in spite of signs to the contrary that would not have escaped a man of less self-sufficiency he still considered himself as receiving a warm welcome at the Abbey whenever he chose to put in an appearance.

Young George blinked at his method of address, but rose and shook hands with him politely. The Vicar put his hand on his shoulder and gave him a little shake. "We must be friends, you and I," he said. "I like boys, and it isn't so very long since I was one myself, though I dare say I seem a very old sort of person to all you young people."

Young George blinked again. "What an appalling creature!" was the comment he made up for later use. But he did not even meet Barbara's significant look, and stood aside for the visitor to enter the circle round the table.

"Now, young lady, if I'm not too late for a cup of tea," said the Vicar, seating himself by Caroline, after he had shaken hands all round with appropriate comment, "I shall be glad of it. You always have such delicious teas here. I'm afraid I'm sometimes tempted to look in more often than I should otherwise on that account alone."

"Why didn't you bring Mrs. Mercer?" asked Miss Waterhouse. "We haven't seen her for some days."

Miss Waterhouse hardly ever failed to suggest Mrs. Mercer as his expected companion when he put in his appearances at tea-time. It was beginning to occur to

him that Miss Waterhouse was something of the Dragon that he had heard his young friends call her, and had once playfully called her himself, though without the success that he had anticipated from his pleasantry. He was inclined to resent her presence in the family circle of which she seemed to him so unsuitable a member. He prided himself upon getting on so well with young people, and these young Graftons were so easy to get on with, up to a point. The point would have been passed and that intimacy which he always just seemed to miss with them would have been his if it had not always been for this stiff unsympathetic governess. She was always there and always took part in the conversation, and always spoilt it, when he could have made it so intimate and entertaining. Miss Waterhouse had to be treated with respect, though. He had tried ignoring her, as the governess, who would be grateful for an occasional kindly word; but it had not worked. She refused to be ignored, and he could hardly ever get hold of the girls, really to make friends, without her.

"Well, I was on my way home," he said. "I have been visiting since lunch-time. I have been right to the far end of the parish to see a poor old woman who is bedridden, but so good and patient that she is a lesson to us all." He turned to Caroline. "I wonder if you would walk up to Burnt Green with me some afternoon and see her. I was telling her about you, and I know what pleasure it would give her to see a bright young face like yours. I'm sure, if you only

sat by her bedside and talked to her it would do her good. She is *so* lonely, poor old soul!"

He spoke very earnestly. Caroline looked at him with dislike tingeing her expression, though she was not aware of it. But Miss Waterhouse replied, before she could do so. "If you will tell us her name and where to find her, Mr. Mercer, we shall be glad to go and see her sometimes."

He gave the required information, half-unwillingly, as it seemed; but this lady was so very insistent in her quiet way. "Mollie Walter comes visiting with me sometimes," he said. "I don't say, you know, that sick people are not pleased to see their clergyman when he calls, but I am not too proud to say that a sympathetic young girl often does more good at a bedside than even the clergyman."

"I should think anybody would be pleased to see Mollie," said Beatrix. "If I were ill she is just the sort of person I should like to see."

"Better than the clergyman?" enquired the Vicar archly. "Now be careful how you answer."

Beatrix turned her head away indifferently. Young George, who was afflicted to the depths of his soul by the idea of this proffered intimacy, said, awkwardly enough but with intense meaning: "My sisters are not used to go visiting with clergymen, sir. I don't think my father would like it for them."

The Vicar showed himself completely disconcerted, and stared at Young George with open eyes and half-open mouth. The boy was cramming himself with

bread and butter, and his face was red. With his tangled hair, and clothes that his late exertions had made untidy, he looked a mere child. But there was no mistaking his hostility, nor the awkward fact that here was another obstacle to desired intimacy with this agreeable family.

It was so very unexpected. The Vicar had thought himself quite successful, with his hand on his shoulder, and his few kindly words, in impressing himself upon this latest and very youthful member of it as a desirable friend of the family. And behold! he had made an enemy. For Young George's objection to his sisters' visiting with clergymen in general was so obviously intended to be taken as an objection to their visiting with this one. That was made plain by his attitude.

Miss Waterhouse solved the awkward situation. "Visiting sick people in the country is not like visiting people in the slums of London, Bunting dear. Mr. Mercer would let us know if there were any danger of infection. It would be better, though, I think, if we were to pay our visits separately."

There was to be no doubt about that, at any rate. Miss Waterhouse was hardly less annoyed than Young George at the invitation that had been given, and its impertinence was not to be salved over however much it was to be desired that dislike should not be too openly expressed.

Nor did Caroline or Beatrix wish to be made the subject of discussion. They were quite capable of staving off inconvenient advances, and preferred to do it by

lighter methods than those used by Young George, and to get some amusement out of it besides. Caroline laughed, and said: "My darling infant, if we get measles or chicken-pox *you* might catch them too, and then you wouldn't have to go back to school so soon."

Young George had made his protest, and it had cost him something to do it. His traditions included politeness towards a guest, and he would only have broken them under strong provocation. So, although he was still feeling a blind hatred against this one, he did not reply that his objection was not influenced by the fear of infectious disease, but mumbled instead that he did not want to miss the first days of the summer half.

The Vicar had somewhat recovered himself. His self-conceit made it difficult for him to accept a snub, however directly administered, if it could be made to appear in any way not meant for a snub. "Well, it is true that one has to be a little careful about infection sometimes," he said. "But I know of none anywhere about at present. I have to risk it myself in the course of my duty, but I am always careful about it for others. I had to warn Mollie off certain cottages, when she first came here. She has been such a willing little helper to me since the beginning, and one has to look after one's helpers, you know."

He had quite recovered himself now. Mollie, who had been so pleased to be asked to do what he would like these girls to do, and was obviously not to be criticised, in his position, for asking them to do, was a great stand-by. "I really don't know how I got on

before Mollie came," he said. "And Mrs. Mercer feels just the same about her. She has been like a daughter to us."

"She's a dear," said Beatrix. "She has half promised to come and see us in London, when we go up. She has actually hardly ever been to London at all."

"It's *most* kind of you to take such an interest in her," said the Vicar. "But you mustn't spoil her, you know. I'm not sure that she wouldn't be rather out of place in the sort of life that *you* lead in London. She isn't used to going about, and hasn't been brought up to it. If you are kind to her when you are down here, and ask her to come and see you now and then, but don't let her make herself a burden on you, you will be doing her a great kindness, and all that can be required of you."

There was a slight pause. "We look upon Mollie as our friend," said Miss Waterhouse, "and one does not find one's friends a burden."

They sat on round the tea-table, and conversation languished. The Vicar made tentative advances towards a stroll round the garden, but they were not taken up. Young George was dying to get away to his activities, but did not like to make a move, so sat and fidgeted instead, his distaste for the Vicar growing apace.

At last the Vicar got up to take his leave. Young George accompanied him to the gate which led from the garden into the road, and opened it for him. "Well good-bye, my young friend," said the Vicar, his hand

again on the boy's shoulder. "I hope you'll have an enjoyable holiday here. We must do all we can to make it amusing for you."

"Thank you, sir," said young George, looking down on the ground, and the Vicar took himself off, vaguely dissatisfied, but not blaming himself at all for any awkwardness that had peeped through during his visit.

Young George went back to the tea-table, his cheeks flaming. "What a *beast!*" he said hotly. "What a *cad!* Why do you have a creature like that here?"

"Darling old boy!" said Caroline soothingly. "He's not worth making a fuss about. We can deal with him all right. He won't come here so much when he finds out we don't want him. But we must be polite as long as he does come."

"Fancy him having the cheek to ask you to go visiting with him!" said Young George. "I'm jolly glad I let him know I wouldn't stand it. I know Dad wouldn't, and when he's not here I'm the man who has to look after you."

Beatrix caught hold of him and kissed him. "We love being looked after by you, Bunting," she said. "It's jolly to have a brother old enough to do it. But don't fash yourself about Lord Salisbury, dear. We get a lot of fun out of his efforts."

"You mustn't quarrel with him, Bunting," said Barbara. "If you do, he'll leave off calling me a sunbeam."

"If I hear him doing that," said Bunting, "I shall tell him what I *really* think of him."

CHAPTER VIII

WHITSUNTIDE

WHITSUNTIDE, which fell in June that year, found a large party assembled at the Abbey. Grafton had brought down a few friends every Friday since Easter, but this was the first time that the house had been full.

He had enjoyed those week-ends at Abington more consciously than he had enjoyed anything for years. And yet there was 'nothing to do,' as he was careful to inform everybody whom he asked down. He would have hesitated himself, before he had bought Abington, over spending two and sometimes three and four days in the week in a country house, in late spring and early summer, with no very good golf links near, no river or sea, nothing specially interesting in the way of guests, or elaborate in the preparations made to entertain them. While the children had been growing up he had paid occasional visits to quiet country houses, in this way, and since Caroline had left the schoolroom they had sometimes paid them together. But once or twice in the year, outside the shooting season, had been quite enough. There were more amusing things to be done, and he had been so accustomed to skimming the cream off every social pleasure that he had always been on the lookout for amusing things to be done, though he

had not cared for them when he did them much more than he enjoyed other parts of his easy life.

It was all too much on the same level. Special enjoyment only comes by contrast. Grafton's work interested him, and he did not do enough of it ever to make him want a holiday for the sake of a holiday, and seldom enough on any given day to make him particularly glad to leave it and go home. He liked leaving it, to go home or to his club for a rubber. But then he also rather liked leaving his home to go down to the City, in the mornings. When he had been to the City for four or five days running, he liked to wake up and feel he was not going there. If he had been away for some time, he was pleased to go back to it, though perhaps he would have been equally pleased to do something else, as long as it was quite different from what he had been doing. He liked dining out; he also liked dining at home. If he had dined alone with his family two or three times running, he liked having guests; if he had dined in company four or five times running, he preferred to dine alone with his family. It was the same all through. The tune to which his life was played was change: constant little variations of the same sort of tune. He would never have said that he was not satisfied with it; it was the life he would have chosen to go back to at any time, if he had been cut off from it, and there was indeed no other kind of life that he could not have had if he had chosen to change it. But it held no great zest. The little changes were too frequent, and had become

in course of time no more than a series of crepitations in a course of essential sameness.

His buying of Abington Abbey had presented itself to him at first as no more than one of these small changes which made up his life. Although he had had it in his mind to buy a country house for some years past, he had not exerted himself to find one, partly for fear that it would reduce the necessary amount of change. The London house was never a tie. You could leave it whenever you wished to. But a country house would make claims. It might come to be irksome to have to go to it, instead of going here, there, and everywhere, and if you forsook it too much it might reproach you. Other people's country houses would never do that.

But ownership had had an effect upon him that he would never have suspected. The feeling of home, which had hitherto centred entirely in his family, still centred there, but gained enormously in richness from the surroundings in which he had placed them. The thousand little interests of the place itself, and of the country around it, were beginning to close in on them and to colour them afresh; they stood out of it more, and gained value from their setting. His own interests in it, too, were increasing, and included many things in which he had never thought of himself as taking any keen interest. He did not, as yet, care much for details of estate management, and left all that to Worthing, who was a little disappointed that a man who filled a big position in the financial world was not prepared to

make something of a hobby of what to him was the difficult part of his work, and ease his frequent anxieties about it by his more penetrating insight. But Grafton did not leave his bank parlour in Lombard Street on Friday afternoon in order to spend Saturday morning in his Estate Office in Abington. Nor did he go far afield for his pleasures. The nearest golf links worth his playing over, who was used to the best, were ten miles away, which was nothing in a car, but he preferred to send his guests there, if any of them wanted to play golf, and stay at home himself, or play a round on the nine-hole park course at Wilborough. He took interest in the rearing of game, but that was about the only thing that took him even about his own property. For the present, at least, in the spring and early summer the house and the garden were enough for him, and a cast or two in the lengthening evenings over one or other of the pools into which the river that meandered through the park widened here and there.

Nothing to do! But there was an infinity of little things to do, which filled his days like an idle but yet active and happy dream. The contrasts of the quiet country life were only more minute than those which made the wider more varied life blend into a somewhat monotonous whole. They were there, to give it interest and charm, but they seemed to relieve it of all monotony. The very sameness *was* its charm. It was enough to wake up in this quiet spacious beautiful house lapped in the peace of its sylvan remoteness, and to

feel that the day was to be spent there, it mattered not how. When the time came to leave it, he left it with regret, and when he came back to it, it was to take up its life at the point at which he had left it. He had thought of it only as a holiday house—only as a very occasional holiday house until the autumn should make it something more,—and that a succession of guests would be almost a necessity on his week-end visits, if they were to get the pleasant flavour out of it. But he had arranged for no big party of them during two months of regular visits, and on the whole had enjoyed it more on the days when he had been alone with the family.

He had never liked his family so much as in these days when they were his constant and sometimes sole companions. Hitherto, in London, except for their occasional quiet evenings together, it had always meant going out to do something, and until lately, since Caroline had grown up, it had generally meant inventing something to go out for. In the main, his pursuits had been other than theirs. With Young George, especially, it had been sometimes almost irksome to take the responsibility of finding amusement for him. And yet he loved his little son, and wanted to have him grow up as his companion.

Well, Young George wanted no better one; there was no necessity to find amusement for him at Abington. Abington, with all that went with it, *was* amusement for both of them, every hour of the day. Young George would follow him about everywhere, chattering

effusively all the time, completely happy and at ease with him. He had reached the age at which a boy wants his play to be the play of a man, and wants a man to play it with. When Grafton was up in London he immersed himself in more childish pursuits, with Barbara as his companion, or Jimmy Beckley, who was a constant visitor during the Easter holidays. But his best days were those on which his father was there, and on those days he would hardly let him out of his sight. Grafton felt quite sad when he went back to school. Previously he had felt a trifle of relief when the end of the holidays came.

Miss Waterhouse and Barbara had stayed at Abington ever since they had moved down there. Caroline had only been up to London once for the inside of the week, although the season was now in full swing, and it had never been intended that they should not be chiefly in London until the end of it. The time for moving up had been put off and put off. The country was so delightful in the late spring and early summer. After Whitsuntide perhaps they would move up to London. But it had never been definitely settled that they should do so, and hitherto Caroline had seemed quite content to miss all her parties, and to enjoy her days in the garden and in the country, and her evenings in the quiet house.

Beatrix had been presented, and had been hard at it in London, staying with her aunt, Lady Handsworth, and enjoying herself exceedingly. But she had come down to Abington twice with her father. Abington was

home now, and weighed even against the pleasures of a first London season.

The Whitsuntide guests were Lord Handsworth, Grafton's brother-in-law, with his wife and daughter, a girl of about Caroline's age, Sir James and Lady Grafton, the Marquis de Clermont-Lassigny, the Honourable Francis Parry, and one or two more out of that army of Londoners who are to be found scattered all over the country houses of England on certain days of the week at certain times of the year.

Lassigny was one of those men who appear very English when they are in England and very French when they are in France. He was a handsome man, getting on in the thirties. He had been attached to the French Embassy in London, but had inherited wealth from an American mother, and had relinquished a diplomatic career to enjoy himself, now in Paris, now in London, and sometimes even in his fine château in Picardy, which had been saved for him by his mother's dollars. It was supposed that he was looking out for an English wife, if he could find one to his taste, but his pursuit during many visits to England spread over some years had not been very arduous. He had danced a good deal with Caroline during her two seasons; and her aunt, who had taken her about, as she now took Beatrix, had rather expected that something might come of it. Caroline had always thought she knew better. Her virginal indifference to the approaches of men had not prevented her from appreciating the signs of special devotion, and she had seen none in Lassigny. He had

been very friendly, and she liked the friendship of men. It would hardly have been too much to say of her, at the age of twenty-one, and after two full seasons and the months of country house visiting that had passed with them, that she was still in the schoolgirl state of thinking that anything approaching love-making 'spoilt things.' She was rather too experienced to hold that view in its entirety, but it was hers in essence; she had never wanted the signs of attraction in any man to go beyond the point at which they made agreeable the friendship. It was the friendship she liked; the love that might be lurking beneath it she was not ready for, though it might add a spice to the friendship if it were suspected but did not obtrude itself.

It had been so with Francis Parry. They were very good friends, and he admired her; that she knew well enough. But she did not want him to make it too plain. If he had done so she would have had to bethink herself, and she did not want to do that. With Lassigny she had not felt like that. He was older than Francis, and more interesting. Young men of Francis's age and upbringing were so much alike; you knew exactly what to talk to them about, and it was always the same. But Lassigny, in spite of his English appearance and English tastes, had other experiences, and to talk to him was to feel them even if they were not expressed. He had his own way of behaving too, which was not quite the same as that of a young Englishman. It was a trifle more formal and ceremonious. Caroline had the idea that he was watching

her, and as it were experimenting with her, under the guise of the pleasant intimacy that had grown up between them. If she proved to be what he wanted he might offer her marriage, perhaps before he should have taken any steps towards wooing her. It was interesting, even a little thrilling, to be on the edge of that unknown. But, unless he was quite unlike other men who had come within her experience, the impulsion from within had not come to him, after two years. She would have known if it had, or thought she would.

The Whitsuntide party mixed well. There were bridges in this family between youth and age, or middle-age; for Sir James Grafton, who was the oldest of them all, was not much over fifty, though he looked older. He was fond of his nieces, and they of him, and he did not feel the loss of his laboratory so acutely when he was in their company. Lord Handsworth was also a banker—a busy bustling man who put as much energy into his amusements as into his work. He was the only one of the party for whom it was quite necessary to provide outside occupation. Fortunately that was to be found on the Sandthorpe links, and he spent his three days there, with whoever was willing to accompany him. The rest 'sat about' in the gorgeous summer weather, played lawn games, went for walks and rides and drives, and enjoyed themselves in a lotus-eating manner. And in the evenings they assembled in the long gallery, played bridge and music, talked and laughed, and even read; for there was room enough in

it for Sir James to get away with a book, and enjoy seclusion at the same time as company.

Such parties as these make for intimacy. On Monday evening there was scarcely a member of it who did not feel some faint regret at the breaking up that was to come on the next morning, unless it was Lord Handsworth, who had exhausted the novelty of the Sandthorpe links. Worthing had come to dine, but the only other outside guest had been Bertie Pemberton. It was near midsummer, for Easter had been late that year. Most of them were in the garden, sitting in the yew arbour, or strolling about under a sky of spangled velvet.

Francis Parry was with Caroline. He had been with her a good deal during the last three days, and their friendship had taken a deeper tinge. She was a little troubled about it, and it was not by her wish that he and she found themselves detached from the group with which they had set out to stroll through the gardens.

They had all gone together as far as the lily pond. This was a new bit of garden-planning on a somewhat extensive scale; for Grafton had lost no time in taking up this fascinating country pursuit, and Caroline had busied herself over its carrying out. It was actually an entirely new garden of considerable size carved out of the park. The stone-built lily pond was finished, the turf laid, the borders dug and filled, the yews planted. It had been a fascinating work to carry out, but it had had to be done in a hurry at that time of the year, and hardly as yet gave any of the impression

that even a winter's passing would have foreshadowed. It was led up to by a broad flagged path, and when the company had reached the pond most of them turned back and left it again.

But Francis Parry seemed more interested in it than the rest, and stayed where he was, asking questions of Caroline, who had answered most of them during earlier visits.

"I suppose this is really what has kept you down here, isn't it," he asked, "when you ought to have been amusing yourself in London?"

She laughed, and said: "I amuse myself better down here. I love being in the country. I don't miss London a bit."

"I like the country too," he said, "even in the summer."

Caroline laughed again. "'*Even* in the summer'!" she repeated. "It's the best of all times."

"Oh, well, I know," he said. "It's more beautiful, and that's what you like about it, isn't it? It's what I like too. A night like this is heavenly. Let's stop here a few minutes and take it in. I suppose your beautiful stone seats are meant to be sat on, aren't they? We ought to do justice to your new garden."

"I'm afraid you're laughing at my new garden," said Caroline. "But perhaps it will do the poor thing good to be treated as if it were really grown up. It *will* be lovely in a year or two, you know."

She moved across the grass, which even the light of the moon showed not yet to have settled into smooth

unbroken turf, and sat down on a stone bench in a niche of yew. The separate trees of which it was composed were as large as could have been safely transplanted, but they had not yet come together, and were not tall enough to create the effect of seclusion, except in the eye of faith. Caroline laughed again. "It *ought* to be rather romantic," she said, "but I'm afraid it isn't quite yet."

"I should think any garden romantic with you in it," said the young man, taking his seat by her side.

"Thanks," she said lightly. "I do feel that I fit in. But I think you had better wait a year or two to see how all this is going to fit *me*. Come down for Whitsuntide in three years' time, when the hedges have grown up. Then I will sit here and make a real picture for you."

She made an entrancing picture as it was, her white frock revealing the grace of her slim body, the moon silvering her pretty fair hair and resting on the delicate curves of her cheek and her neck. The yews were tall enough to give her their sombre background, and a group of big trees behind them helped out the unfinished garden picture.

"It has altered you, you know, already," said Francis, rather unexpectedly.

"What has altered me? Living in a garden? That's what I've been doing for the last few weeks."

"Yes. Living in a garden. Living in the country. You're awfully sweet as a country girl, Caroline."

"A dewy English girl. That's what B and I said

we should be when we came down here. I'm awfully glad you've seen it so soon. Thanks ever so much, Francis."

There was a slight pause. Then the young man said in his quiet well-bred voice: "I've never been quite sure whether I was in love with you or not. Now I know I am, and have been all along."

Now that it had come—what she had felt coming for the last three days, and had instinctively warded off—she felt quite calm and collected. She approved of this quiet way of introducing a serious subject. There had been one or two attempted introductions of the same subject which had been more difficult to handle. But it ought to be talked over quietly, between two sensible people, who liked one another, and understood one another. They might possibly come to an agreement, or they might not. If they didn't, they could still go on being friends. That it was somewhat lacking in romance did not trouble her. The less romance had to do with the business of marriage the more likely it was to turn out satisfactorily; provided always that there was genuine liking and some community of taste. That was Caroline's view of marriage, come to after a good deal of observation. Since her first season she had always intended to choose with her head. Her heart, she thought, would approve of her choice if she put her head first. The head, she had noticed, did not always approve afterwards when the heart had been allowed to decide. But love, of course, must not be left out of account in marriage. With the girl it could

be safely left to spring out of liking; with the man it might do the same, but he must attain to it before he made his proposal. Francis seemed to have done that, and she knew him very well, and liked him. If she must be proposed to, she would prefer it to be in exactly this way—perhaps with the yew hedges grown a little more, and the squares of turf come closer together. But it would do very well as it was, with the fountain splashing in the lily pond, and the moonlight falling on the roofs and windows of the old house, which could be seen through the broad vista of the formal garden.

"I hadn't meant to marry just yet," Francis made his confession, as she did not immediately reply to him. "But for some time I've thought that when I did I should want to marry you—if you'd have me. Do you think you could, Caroline?"

"I don't know yet," said Caroline directly. "Why hadn't you meant to marry just yet?"

"Oh, well; I'm only twenty-seven, you know. I shouldn't want to marry yet for the *sake* of being married. Still, everything's changed when you're really in love with a girl. Then you *do* want to get married. You begin to see there's nothing like it. If I'd felt about you as I feel about you now, when I first knew you, I should have wanted to marry you then."

"I think I was only fifteen when we first knew each other."

"Was that all? Yes, it was when I'd just come down from Oxford. Well, I liked you then, and I've gone on liking you ever since. You were awfully attractive

when you were fifteen. I believe I did fall in love with you then. You liked me too rather, didn't you?"

"Yes, I did. It was that day up the river. I was rather shy, as B and I were the only girls who weren't grown up. But you talked to us both, and were very nice. Oh, yes, Francis, I've always liked you."

"Well then, won't you try and love me a bit? I do love you, you know. If I've kept a cool head about it, it's because I think that's the best way, with a girl you're going to spend your life with—if you have the luck—until you're quite certain she *is* the girl you want. As a matter of fact there's never been another with me. If I haven't come forward, as they say in books, it hasn't been because I've ever thought about anybody else."

It was all exactly as it should have been. *He* had chosen with his head too, and now his heart had stepped in just at the right time, to corroborate his choice. And she did like him; there had never been anything in him that she hadn't liked, since that first day when in all his Leander smartness, among all the young men who had devoted themselves to the young women of the party, he had been the one who had made himself agreeable to the two half-fledged girls. She liked too his saying that there had never been anybody else. The first statement that he hadn't intended to marry just yet had chilled her a trifle, though there had been nothing in it to conflict with her well-thought-out theory.

"It's very nice of you to say that," she said. "I haven't thought about anybody else either. We should both be glad of that afterwards, if we did marry."

"Then you will say yes," he said eagerly, drawing suddenly a little nearer to her.

She drew away quickly and instinctively, and rose from the seat. "Oh, I haven't said so yet," she said. "I must think a lot about it first. But thank you very much for asking me, Francis. It's very sweet of you. Now I think we'd better be going in."

He rose too. She looked lovely standing there in the moonlight, in all her virginal youth and grace. If he had put his arm round her, and pleaded for his answer! His senses bade him take her, and keep her for his own -the sweetest thing to him on God's earth at that moment. But he wouldn't frighten her; he must wait until she was ready. Then, if she'd give herself to him, he would be completely happy. By the use of his brains he was becoming a very good financier, though still young. But it is doubtful whether his brains guided him aright in this crisis of his life.

"I'm very disappointed that you can't say yes now," he said, his voice trembling a little. "I do love you, Caroline—awfully."

She liked him better at that moment than she had ever liked him before. The man of the world, composed of native adaptability and careful training, had given place to the pleading youth, who had need of her. But she had no need of him, for the moment at least. "I *must* think it over, Francis," she said, almost pleading

in her turn. "Don't let's be in a hurry. We're both such sensible people."

"I don't know that I feel in a particularly sensible mood just at present," he said with a wry smile. "But I'm not going to rush you, my dear. I shall give you a week or two to think it over, and then I shall come and ask you again. God knows, I want you badly enough."

CHAPTER IX

CAROLINE AND BEATRIX

All the guests departed on Tuesday morning with the exception of Sir James and Lady Grafton. It was a surprising compliment on the part of Sir James that he should have proposed to stay over another day. He explained it by saying that he hadn't quite got the hang of the library yet. The library was well furnished with old books in which nobody had hitherto taken much interest. But Sir James did not, as a matter of fact, spend a great deal of his time there on the extra day that he had proposed to devote to it. He spent most of his time out of doors with one or other of his nieces, and although he carried a calf-bound volume of respectable size in either pocket of his coat he left them reposing there as far as could be seen.

"The dear old thing!" said his young and sprightly wife. "What he really likes is pottering about quietly with the children. They really are dears, George. I wish we saw more of them; but you never will bring them to Frayne. I suppose it's too dull for you."

"Well, it is rather dull," said Grafton, who was on the best of terms with his sister-in-law. "If James and I didn't meet in the City I should want to go and see him there sometimes, but——"

"Well, that's a nice speech!" exclaimed her ladyship. "You don't meet *me* in the City. But I'll forgive you. After all, it isn't *you* I want to see at Frayne—it's the children. They're growing up so nicely, George. You owe a lot to Miss Waterhouse. I've never seen two girls of Caroline's and Beatrix's ages who can do as much to make all sorts and ages of people enjoy themselves. James says the same. He didn't want to come here much, to a big party, but now you see you can't get him away. And dear little Barbara will be just the same. James adores Barbara, and it's awfully pretty to see her taking him about with her arm in his, and chattering about everything in earth and heaven. I wish we'd had some girls. The boys are darlings, of course, but they're not peaceful when they're growing up, and my dear old James loves peace."

"We all do," said Grafton. "That's why we love this place. It's quite changed *me* already. When one of your boys is ready to come into the Bank I shall retire and become a country squire, of the kind that never steps outside his own house."

"Oh, no, you won't, George. James retires before you. I wish the boys were older. It's James's fault for not marrying at the proper age. However, if he'd done that he wouldn't have married me, for I was in the cradle at that time."

"They must have pretty big cradles where you come from," said Grafton.

She gave him a reproving pat on the sleeve; she liked

that kind of joke. "This is really a nicer place than Frayne," she said. "I don't wonder you've taken to it. It's hardly fair that the younger brother should have a nicer place than the elder. But I think now you've settled down in a house of your own, George, you ought to think of marrying again. I never thought you wanted it while you were a young man about town, but if you're going to change all your tastes and settle down in the country you will want a wife to look after things for you."

"I've got the children," he said shortly.

"My dear boy, you don't think you're going to keep them long, do you? It's a marvel to me that Caroline hasn't married already. She's been one of the prettiest of all the girls, and B is even prettier, if that's possible. You'll lose 'em both pretty soon, if I'm not very much mistaken."

He turned to her in some alarm. "What do you mean?" he asked. "There's nothing going on, is there?"

She laughed. "How blind men are," she said. M. de Lassigny is head over ears in love with B."

"Oh, my dear Mary, what nonsense! Excuse my saying so, but it's such a short time since you were in the cradle."

"Very well, George. You may call it nonsense if you like. But you'll see."

"He's been a friend of Caroline's for the last two years. It was she who asked him down here. It would be her if it were anybody, but I know it isn't."

"You may know it isn't Caroline. I know it too. They're just friends. You can't know it isn't B, because it is."

"What makes you say so? He's been just like all the rest of them here. He's been with Caroline just as much as with B. Barbara too, I should say, and the other girls as well."

"That's his artfulness, George. You can't hide these things from a woman—at any rate if she has eyes in her head and knows how to use them. I'm interested in your girls, not having any of my own, so I do use my eyes. He may not be ready to declare himself yet, but he will, sooner or later."

"I should hate that, you know. I don't believe B would take it on for a moment either. Do you?"

"I don't know. If I thought I did I'd tell you so. But why should you hate it? He's just like an Englishman. And he's rich, with an old property and all that sort of thing. He isn't like an adventurer, with a title that comes from nobody knows where. He'd be a very good match. Why should you hate it?"

"I should hate one of the girls to marry a foreigner. I've never thought of such a thing. I don't want either of them to marry yet—certainly not my little B. I want them at home for a bit. I haven't had enough of them yet. We're all going to enjoy ourselves together here for a year or two. They like it as much as I do. Even B, who's enjoying herself in London, likes to come here best,—bless her. She's having her fling. I like 'em to do that; and they're not like other girls, always

on the lookout for men. They make friends of them but they like their old father best, after all. It can't always be so, I know, but I'm not going to lose them yet awhile, Mary."

"Well, George, you're very lucky in your girls, I will say that; and you deserve some credit for it, too. You haven't left them to go their own way while you went yours, as lots of men in your position would have done. The consequence is they adore you. And they always will. But you can't expect to be first with them when their time comes. You've had Caroline now for two years since she's grown up, and——"

"Well, what about her? There's nobody head over heels in love with *her*, is there?"

"I don't know about head over heels. But Francis Parry is in love with her, and you'll have him proposing very shortly, if he hasn't done it already."

"Oh, my dear Mary, you're letting your match-making tendencies get the better of you. Now you relieve my mind—about B I mean. If there's no more in it than that!"

"Oh, I know what you think. They've been pals, and all that sort of thing, for years. If there had been more than that it would have come out long ago. Well, you'll see. *I* say that it's coming out now. It does happen like that, you know, sometimes."

Grafton was inclined to doubt it. He liked Francis Parry, who would be just the right sort of match for Caroline besides, if it should take them in that sort of way, later on. But that sort of way did not include

a sudden 'falling in love' at the end of some years' frank and free companionship, during which neither of them had been in the least inclined to pine at such times as they saw little of one another. They were both of them much too sensible. Their liking for one another gave the best sort of promise for happiness in married life, if they should, by and by, decide to settle down together. They had been friends for years and they would go on being friends, all their lives. The same could not be said for all married couples, nor perhaps even for the majority of them, who had begun by being violently in love with one another. That, at any rate, could hardly have happened within the last few days. Mary, who had certainly not fallen violently in love with James, though she was undoubtedly fond of him, and made him a very good wife, was over-sentimental in these matters, and had seen what she had wanted to see.

He had a slight shock of surprise, however, not altogether agreeable, when Caroline, during the course of the morning, told him of what had happened to her.

She linked her arm affectionately in his. "Come for a stroll, darling," she said. "It's rather nice to have got rid of everybody, and be just ourselves again, isn't it?"

She led him to the lily pond. Although everything was finished there now, and neither the yews nor the newly laid turf could have been expected to come together between their frequent visits, they went to look at it several times a day, just to see how it was get-

ting on. So there was no difficulty in drawing him there; and, as other members of the family were satisfied with less frequent inspection, they were not likely to be disturbed.

"Come and sit down," she said, when they had stood for some time by the pool, and discussed the various water-lilies that they had sunk there, tied up between the orthodox turfs. "I want to talk to you."

They sat down on the stone seat. "Talk away!" he said, taking a cigarette out of his case.

Caroline took cigarette and case away from him. "Darling," she said, "you didn't select it. In books they always *select* a cigarette, usually with care. I'll do it for you."

She gave him a cigarette, took his matchbox out of his pocket, and lit it for him. "I'm really only doing this to save time," she said. "I have a confession to make. The last time I sat on this seat I was proposed to."

"The devil!" exclaimed her father, staring at her.

"No, darling, not the devil. I'm not so bad as that. Don't be offensive to your little daughter—or profane."

"Who was it? Francis Parry?"

"Yes, darling. You've got it in one. It was last night. The moon was shining and the yews looked *almost* like a real hedge. Rather a score for our garden, I think."

He took a draw at his cigarette and inhaled it. "Well, if that's the way you take it, I suppose you didn't accept him," he said.

Having taken the fence of introducing the subject, she became more serious. "No, I didn't accept him," she said. "But I didn't refuse him either. I wanted to talk to you about it first."

That pleased him. At this time of day one no longer expected to have the disposal of one's daughter's hand, or to be asked for permission to pay addresses to her, if the man who paid them was justified in doing so by his social and financial position, and probably even less so if he wasn't. But it was gratifying that his daughter should put his claims on her so high that she would not give her answer until she had consulted him about it first.

"Well, darling," he said, "I don't want you to marry anybody just yet. But Francis Parry is a very nice fellow. I'd just as soon you married him as anybody if you want to. Do you?"

"Perhaps I might," she said doubtfully. "I do like him. I think we should get on all right together." There was a slight pause. "He likes Dickens," she added.

Grafton did not smile. "Mary has just told me that you've suddenly fallen in love with one another," he said. It was not exactly what Mary had told him, but he was feeling a trifle sore with her for seeing something that he hadn't, and for another reason which he hadn't examined yet.

"Aunt Mary is too clever by half," said Caroline. "She couldn't have seen anything in me that hasn't always been there. But Francis did say he loved me.

I suppose he had to, didn't he, Dad? No, I don't mean that. I mean he'd expect one to begin with that, wouldn't he?"

He was touched; he couldn't have told why, unless it was from some waft of memory from his own wooing, which had certainly begun with that. He put his arm round her and kissed her. "Do you love him?" he asked her.

She returned his kiss warmly. "Not half as much as I love you, darling old Daddy," she said. "I don't want to go away from you for a long time yet. Supposing I tell Francis that I like him very much, but I don't want to marry anybody yet. How would that do?"

"It seems to fit the bill," he said in a lighter tone. "No, don't get married yet, Cara. We're going to have a lot of fun here. It would break things up almost before they've begun. I say, is there anything between Lassigny and B?"

She laughed. "Has Aunt Mary seen that too?" she asked.

"She says she has. Why! have *you* seen it? Surely not!"

"To tell you the truth, I haven't looked very carefully. They like each other, I suppose, just as he and I like each other. He hasn't been any different to me; I think he's been as much with me as he has with her."

"Yes, but B herself, I mean. She wouldn't want to fall in love with a foreigner, would she?"

"How British you are, darling! I never think about M. de Lassigny as a foreigner."

"I do though. I should hate one of you girls to marry anybody not English. B doesn't like him in that way, does she?"

"I don't think so, dear. I don't think she likes anybody in that way yet. She's just like I was, when I first came out, enjoying herself frightfully and making lots of friends. He was one of the people I liked first of all. He's interesting to talk to. She likes lots of other men too. In fact she has talked to me about lots of them, but I don't think she's ever mentioned him—before he came here, I mean."

Whether that fact seemed quite convincing to Caroline or no, it relieved her father. "Oh, I don't suppose there's anything in it," he said. "His manners with women are a bit more elaborate than an Englishman's. I suppose that's what Mary has got hold of. I must say, *I* didn't notice him paying any more attention to B than to you; or Barbara either, for that matter. Of course B is an extraordinarily pretty girl. She's bound to get a lot of notice. I hope she won't take up with anybody yet awhile though. I don't want to lose her. I don't want to lose any of you. Anyway, I should hate losing her to a Frenchman."

His fears were further reduced by Beatrix's treatment of him during that day, and when they went up to London together the next morning. She was very clinging and affectionate, and very amusing too. Surely no girl who was not completely heart-whole

could have been so light-hearted and merry over all the little experiences of life that her entry into the world was bringing her! And she hardly mentioned Lassigny's name at all, though there was scarcely one of the numerous acquaintances she had made whom she had not something to say about, and generally to make fun of. Her fun was never ill-natured, but everybody and everything presented itself to her in the light of her gay humour, and was presented to her audience in that light. She was far the wittiest of the three of them, and her bright audacities enchanted her father when she was in the mood for them, when her eyes danced and sparkled with mischief and her laugh rang out like music. He had never been able to think of Beatrix as quite grown up; she was more of a child to him even than Barbara, whom nobody could have thought of as grown up, or anywhere near it. It dismayed him to think of losing her, even if it should be to a man of whom he should fully approve. But, filling his eyes as she did with a sense of the sweet perfection of girlhood, he was wondering if it were possible that she of all the girls who would be married or affianced before the season was over would escape, even if there was nothing to be feared as to the particular attachment that had been put into his mind.

But though it might be impossible to think that she would tread her first gay measure without having hearts laid at her feet, it was quite possible to think of her as dancing through it without picking any of them up. In fact, she as good as told him that that was her

attitude towards all the admiration she was receiving when she went up to fish with him in the evening, and was as charmingly companionable and confidential to him as even he could wish her to be.

She had a way with him that was sweeter to him even than Caroline's way. Caroline treated him as her chosen companion among all men, as he always had been so far, but she treated him as an equal, almost as a brother, though with a devotion not often shown by sisters to brothers. But Beatrix transformed herself into his little dog or slave. She behaved, without a trace of affectation, as if she were about six years old. She ran to fetch and carry for him, she tried to do things that he did, just as Bunting did, and laughed at herself for trying. Caroline often put her face up to his to be kissed, but Beatrix would take his hand, half-furtively, and kiss it softly or lay it to her cheek, or snuggle up to him with a little sigh of content, as if it were enough for her to be with him and adore him. This evening, by the pool at the edge of the park, where the grass was full of flowers and the grey aspens and heavy elms threw their shadows across the water and were reflected in its liquid depths, she was his gillie, and got so excited on the few occasions on which she had an opportunity of using the landing-net, that she got her skirt and shoes and stockings all covered with mud, just as if she were a child with no thought of clothes, instead of a young woman at the stage when they are of paramount importance.

He was so happy with this manifestation of her,

which of all her moods he loved the best, that the discomfort he had felt about her was assuaged. He did not even want to ask her questions. A confiding active child, behaving with the sexlessness of a small boy, she was so far removed from all the absorptions of love-making that it would have seemed almost unnatural to bring them to her mind.

They strolled home very slowly, she carrying for him all he would allow her to carry and clinging to him closely, even making him put his arm round her shoulder, as she had done when she was little, so that she might put her arm around his waist.

"It's lovely being with you, my old Daddywad," she said. Then she sang a little song which a nurse had taught her, and with the mistakes she had made in her babyhood, and with the nurse's intonation:

"*I love Daddy,*
My dear Daddy,
And I know vat 'e loves me;
'E's my blaymate,
Raim or shine,
Vere's not annover Daddy in er worl'
like mine."

She laughed softly, and gave his substantial waist a squeeze. "You do like having me here, don't you, Daddy darling? You do miss me while I'm away?"

"Of course I do," he said. "I should like you to be here always. But you enjoy yourself in London, don't you?"

"Not half as much as I'm enjoying myself now," she said. It was just what Caroline had said. There was nobody either of them liked to be with so much as him. "When it's all over in July we'll stay here for a bit, won't we, Dad? Don't let's go abroad this year. I like this much better."

"I don't want to go abroad," he said. "I expect somebody will want to take you to Cowes though."

"I don't want to miss Cowes. I mean after that. We'll be quiet here and ask very few people, till it's time to go up to Scotland."

"Oh, you're going to Scotland, are you?"

"Yes, with the Ardrishaigs. I told you, darling. You don't love your little daughter enough to remember what she's going to do with herself. But you do like me to enjoy myself, don't you?"

"Of course I do. And you are enjoying yourself like anything, aren't you?"

"Oh, yes. I'm having spiffing fun. I never thought I should like it half so much. It makes everything so jolly. I've enjoyed being at home more because of it, and I shall enjoy it more still when I go back because I've loved being in the quiet country and having fun with you, my old Daddy."

"You're not getting your head turned, with all the young fellows dancing attendance on you?"

She laughed clearly. "That's the best fun of the lot," she said. "They are so silly, a lot of them. I'm sure *you* weren't like that. Did you fall in love a lot when you first had your hair up?"

"Once or twice. It's the way of young fellows."

"I don't think it's the way of young girls, if they're nice. I'm not going to fall in love yet, if I ever do. I think it spoils things. I'm not sure that I don't rather like their falling in love with me though. I should consider it rather a slight if some of them didn't. Besides, they give me a lot of quiet fun."

"Well, as long as you don't fall in love yourself, just yet—— I don't want to lose you yet awhile."

"And I don't want to lose you, my precious old Daddy. I can't be always with you. I must have my fling, you know. But I love to feel you're just round the corner somewhere. I never forget you, darling, even when I'm enjoying myself most."

So that was all right. He was first, and the rest nowhere, with all his girls. He knew more about them than Mary possibly could. He would have to give them up to some confounded fellow some day, but even that wouldn't be so bad if they took it as Caroline had taken Francis Parry's proposal, and they married nice fellows such as he was, who wouldn't really divide them from their father. As for Lassigny, there was evidently no danger of anything of that sort happening. It would have hurt his little B to suggest such a thing, by way of sounding her, and he was glad he hadn't done it.

CHAPTER X

A DRIVE AND A DINNER

"I DO love motoring," said Mrs. Mercer, "especially on a lovely summer evening like this. I wish we had got a car of our own, Albert."

"My dear, when you married a poor country clergyman," said the Vicar, "you renounced all that sort of thing. We must be content with our one-hoss shay. Some day, perhaps, *all* the clergy of the Church of England will be properly paid for devoting their lives to the good of the community, instead of only a few of them. The labourer is worthy of his car. Ha! ha! But I'm afraid it won't happen in *our* time, if it ever happens at all. Too many Socialists and Radicals gnashing their teeth at us. In the meantime let's take the little pleasures that come in our way, and not envy those who are better off than we are. We must never forget that there are some who might think they had a right to envy us."

"Oh, yes, dear," said Mrs. Mercer. "We *are* very well off, really. I'm sure I don't envy anybody. And I really *am* enjoying myself now, and am going to, all the evening."

They were on their way to dine with the Pembertons at Grays. As the Vicarage horse was getting a trifle

too aged to be called upon to make an effort of ten miles each way the Vicar had borrowed a car from the Abbey, and was now being carried softly through the country, which was at its most peaceful and soothing on a fine evening of early July, with the hay scenting the air and the sun slanting its rays over the wide and varied landscape.

"It *was* kind of Caroline to let us have the car," said Mrs. Mercer, reverting to the subject a little later. "It would have taken us hours to get there with poor old Tiglath-Pilezer, and I shouldn't have liked to *bicycle* to dinner at a house like Grays. I'm glad she sent us an open car. One sees the lovely country so much better."

"It's the smallest car they have," said the Vicar; "and I should have preferred a closed one for coming home in. However, we mustn't grumble. It's very kind, as you say, for his rich parishioners to lend their clergyman a car at all."

"I wonder who will be there to-night," said Mrs. Mercer. "Do you think it will be a big dinner-party, Albert? I really think I *must* get a new dress, if we are to begin dining out again. I am quite ashamed to appear in this one at the Abbey. I've worn it so often there."

"Mrs. Pemberton asked us in quite an informal way," said the Vicar, ignoring the latter part of his wife's speech. "There may be others there, or there may be just ourselves. I must confess I should rather like to meet a few people from the other side of the

county. The Pembertons are quite on the edge of our circle, and they're about the only decent people in it."

"Except our own people at Abington," Mrs. Mercer corrected him. "We are very lucky in the Graftons, I must say."

"Yes, I suppose we are, as things go," said the Vicar. "I would rather have had regular country people, though, than rich Londoners. They get absorbed in their friends whom they bring down, and aren't of so much use to their country neighbours as they might be."

"Oh, but Albert, they so often ask us to dine. I'm sure they are very hospitable."

"I don't know that they've asked us so very often. They've asked us very seldom when they've had their smart parties. I suppose, as country bumpkins, we're not good enough. There isn't the intimate air about the house, either, that one might expect. There's a formality. They don't seem to know what to do when one just drops in for a cup of tea, or perhaps just to say something in the morning. They're not used to that sort of thing in London; I know that perfectly well. But they ought to know that it's usual in the country, and not make such a business of it. I hate always being announced by that pompous old Jarvis. One ought to be able to run in and out of the house, just as one does, for instance, with the Walters. They never do it with us either. It's chiefly owing to Miss Waterhouse. A governess, as I suppose she was, and been put into a position that's been too much for her!

There isn't the *friendliness* I like to see in young girls."

"Perhaps they're rather afraid of you, dear. They always give me quite a nice welcome, if I happen to go there without you, which I don't very often do. And they do run in and out of the cottage, and Mollie goes there. I'm glad they have taken such a fancy to Mollie. She's come out wonderfully since they made a friend of her."

"She has come out a little too much for my taste. I feared it would turn her head to be taken notice of, and I ventured to give a friendly word of warning, which was not received as it should have been—by Miss Waterhouse, whom it really had nothing to do with. I'm sorry to have to say it of Mollie, but I'm sadly afraid there's something of the snob in her. More than once she has had an engagement at the Abbey when I wanted her to do something for me. Of course people living in a big house come before old friends. That's understood. But I didn't think Mollie would turn out like that, I must confess."

"Oh, but Albert dear, I'm *sure* she wouldn't neglect you for anybody. You've been so kind to her, and it has meant such a lot to her, your making a companion of her, and all. But, of course, it *is* nice for girls to have other girls to be friends with. I'm sure it would be just the same if the Graftons lived in a small house instead of a big one."

"I beg leave to doubt it, Gertrude. But here we are. The drive is about half a mile long. We shan't see the house for some distance yet."

They had turned in at some handsome lodge gates, and were going along a winding road which ran between iron railings, with fields on either side of it.

"It's not so nice as the park at Abington," said Mrs. Mercer; "more like a farm road except for the lodge. Is Grays as big a house as the Abbey?"

"Bigger, I should say," said her husband. "The Pembertons are a very old Meadshire family. I looked them up in a book in the library at the Abbey. Except the Clintons, over the other side, they are the oldest. They have often married into titled families. They are a good deal better than the Graftons, I should say. Sir James Grafton is only the third baronet, and his grandfather was a jeweller in Nottingham, the book says. Of course, they've made money, which stands for everything in these days. Oh, how that made me jump!"

Another car had come up behind them, of which the powerful horn had given warning that room was asked for it. The smaller car had changed gears at the beginning of the rise, and the larger one swung by it as it made way. Three girls were sitting together on the back seat, and waved as they were carried past. They were Caroline and Beatrix, with Mollie sitting between them.

"Now what on earth does that mean!" exclaimed the Vicar, in a tone of annoyance. "Mollie coming to dine here! But she doesn't even know them. And why didn't Caroline tell me *they* were coming, when I asked

her for the car? Why couldn't we all have come together?"

These questions were presently answered. Bertie Pemberton had come down from London in the afternoon and brought a friend with him. A car had been sent over to Abington to ask that *every*body who happened to be there should come over and dine. Caroline was also particularly asked to persuade little Miss Walter to come with them, and to take no denial. A note would be taken to her, but perhaps she wouldn't come unless she were pressed. This last piece of information, however, was not imparted to the Vicar, and he was left wondering how on earth Mollie came to be there, and with the full determination to find out later.

There was nothing lacking in the warmth of welcome accorded to their guests by the whole Pemberton family, which could hardly have been more loudly expressed if they had come to dine in an asylum for the deaf, and were qualified for residence there. The Vicar had quite forgotten his dislike of this noisy cheerful family. He had bicycled over on a hot day to see Mrs. Pemberton, had found that she had forgotten who he was for the moment, but by engaging her in conversation on the subjects of which she had previously unbosomed herself had regained the interest she had shown in him. He had been given his cup of tea, and shown the village hall, and told that the next time he came over he must come to lunch. Then Mrs. Pemberton had left cards at Abington Vicarage—the Vicar

and his wife being out, unfortunately, at the time,—and before they could return the call had asked them to dine. It was an acquaintanceship, begun under the happiest auspices, which the Vicar quite hoped would ripen into a genuine friendship. He was inclined to like the free-and-easy ways of real old-established country people. They were apt, possibly, to think too much about horses and dogs, but that did not prevent their taking a genuine interest in their fellow-creatures, especially those who were dependent on them for a good deal of their satisfaction in life. Mrs. Pemberton, although she didn't look it, was a woman who did a great deal of good. She would have made an admirable clergyman's wife.

Father Brill, the Vicar of Grays, was also dining, in a cassock. He had only been in the place for three months, but had already established his right to be called Father and to wear a cassock instead of a coat. He was a tall spare man with a commanding nose and an agreeable smile. Old Mr. Pemberton had taken a fancy to him, though he was very outspoken with regard to his eccentricities. But he chaffed him just as freely to his face as he criticised him to others. His attitude towards him was rather like that of a fond father towards a mischievous child. "What do you think that young rascal of mine has been doing now?" was the note on which his references to Father Brill were based.

The Vicar, who was 'low' in doctrine, but inclined to be 'high' in practice—where it didn't matter—had

cautiously commiserated Mrs. Pemberton on the extravagances of her pastor during his first visit. But he had discovered that they caused her no anxiety. The only thing she didn't care about was 'this confession' —auricular, she believed they called it. But as long as she wasn't expected to confess herself, which she should be very sorry to do, as it would be so awkward to ask Father Brill to dinner after it, she wasn't going to make any fuss. It would possibly do the young men of the place a lot of good to confess their sins to Father Brill, if he could induce them to do so; she was pretty certain it would do Bertie good, but, of course, he would never do it. As for the women, if they wanted to go in for that sort of thing, well, let 'em. Father Brill wasn't likely to do them any harm—with that nose. What she *should* have objected to would be to be interfered with in the things she ran herself in the parish. But they got on all right together there. In fact, she went her way and Father Brill went his, and neither of them interfered with the other.

The two clergymen sat on either side of their hostess, and the Vicar was rather inclined to envy the easy terms that Father Brill was on with her. It had not occurred to him to treat a lady in Mrs. Pemberton's position with anything but deference, to listen to her opinions politely, and not to press his own when they differed from hers. But here was Father Brill actually inviting her to discussion, and, while listening politely to what she had to say, finding food for amusement in it, and by no means hiding his amusement from her.

"I'm afraid you must be a good deal older than you admit to," he said. "You must have gained your opinions in girlhood, and they are about those that were held in the thirties and forties of the nineteenth century. That would make you about ninety-three now, and I must admit that you wear very well for your age."

Mrs. Pemberton seemed so to enjoy this kind of treatment that the Vicar took a leaf out of Father Brill's book and became a good deal more familiar, on the same lines, than he had ever thought of being in such a house as that, or at least with the older inhabitants of such a house. Perhaps he kept rather too much to the same lines. He asked Mrs. Pemberton whether she wore a wig, which as a matter of fact she did, though he was far from suspecting it; and as religious matters were being treated in a light vein, to which he had no objection, as long as anything like profanity was excluded, he begged her, if she should ever change her mind about confession, to confess to him and not to Father Brill. "I assure you, my dear lady," he said—Father Brill had once or twice called her 'my dear lady'—that I shan't breathe a word of what you say to anybody—and I'm quite ready to be agreeably shocked."

Father Brill's eyebrows met ominously over his huge nose, and Mrs. Pemberton looked in some surprise at the Vicar, and then took a glance at his wine-glass. But at that moment Mr. Pemberton called out something to her from the foot of the table, and Effie Pem-

berton who was sitting on the right of the Vicar engaged him in talk. Otherwise he would have exploited this vein still further, for he felt he was making rather a success of it.

His wife, meantime, was enjoying herself immensely. The young people were all laughing and talking gaily, and she was not left out of it. Old Mr. Pemberton addressed long narratives to her, but occasionally broke off to shout out: "Eh, what's that? I didn't hear that," if an extra burst of laughter engaged his attention; and after such an interruption he would usually address himself next to Caroline, who was sitting on the other side of him. So Mrs. Mercer found that she need not devote herself entirely to him, and laughed away as merrily as any of them, if there was anything to laugh at, which there generally was.

They really were nice, these Pembertons, in spite of their loudness and their horsey tastes. Kate sat next to her, and looked very handsome, with her abundant hair beautifully dressed and her white firm flesh liberally displayed. She was some years younger than her sisters, and had not yet acquired that almost weather-beaten look which is apt to overtake young country women who spend the greater part of their waking hours out of doors, and was already beginning to show in Nora and Effie. She had a great deal to say to Bertie's friend who sat on the other side of her, but she by no means neglected Mrs. Mercer, and whenever conversation was general brought her into it. She also

occasionally talked to her alone, when Mr. Pemberton was engaged with Caroline.

"I like that little Waters girl, or whatever her name is," she said on one of these occasions, looking across to where Mollie was sitting between Nora and Bertie Pemberton. "She's quiet, but she does know how to laugh. Quite pretty too."

"Oh, she's a dear," said Mrs. Mercer enthusiastically. "We are *awfully* fond of her. I don't know what my husband would do without her."

Kate laughed. "That's what Bertie seems to be feeling," she said. "He spotted her when we went over to Abington the other day. We rather chaffed him about it, as the Grafton girls are so *extraordinarily* pretty, and we hadn't taken so much notice of her ourselves. But he insisted upon her being sent for to-night, and made Nora write. I'm glad she came. We all three make pals of men, but we like girls too. I hope we shall see more of her. I expect we shall, if Bertie has anything to do with it."

She turned to her other neighbour, and Mrs. Mercer looked across to where Bertie Pemberton was entertaining Mollie with some vivacious narrative that was making her laugh freely. It was quite true that she *could* laugh, and looked very pretty as she did so. Mrs. Mercer had had no idea how pretty she really was. Her generous heart gave a jump of pleasure as she saw how Bertie Pemberton was addressing himself to her. Supposing—only supposing—that *that* should happen! How perfectly splendid for dear little Mollie,

who had had such a dull life, but was worth any sort of life that could be given her. And how pleased her husband would be! They would have something to talk about when they went home.

They played round games at a table in the drawing-room—all of them, including Mr. Pemberton, who did not like to be left out of anything—to an accompaniment of much shouting and laughter. The two cars were kept waiting for half an hour before the guests departed, and they returned as they had come. The Vicar had wanted Mollie to accompany him and his wife, but as she had hesitated, with a glance at Beatrix, which plainly showed her own wishes in the matter, Caroline had put in her claim and settled it for her.

So the Vicar started on the homeward drive not in the best of humours, especially as the other car was being kept back while the three girls were still laughing and talking as if they were going to stay all night, although he and his wife had been permitted to leave when they were ready to do so.

"Really, Miss Caroline has a fairly abrupt way with her when it suits her," he said. "If we hadn't been indebted to her for the loan of the car, I should certainly have insisted that Mollie come with us. We live nearly opposite, and the Pemberton's car will have to go out of the way to take her home. Mollie ought to have had the sense to see it herself, and the pluck to take matters into her own hands. She is allowing herself to be led away by all the notice she is receiving. I have yet to learn exactly how it was that she came

to be here to-night. There's something I don't understand, and I don't quite like it."

"Oh, I can tell you all about that, Albert dear," said Mrs. Mercer eagerly. "I've been longing to tell you, and you'll be *so* pleased. It was Bertie Pemberton. He has taken an *immense* fancy to Mollie, and it was he who insisted that she should be sent for with the Grafton girls. Kate told me so herself, and they like her so much, and they are going to make Mrs. Pemberton call on Mrs. Walter, and have Mollie over there often. Just *fancy*, if anything should come of it!"

"Well, I never!" said the Vicar in his coldest tones.

Mrs. Mercer felt the drop in the temperature. "But it would be such a *splendid* thing for Mollie, dear," she pleaded, "and she does so come out in company. I thought she looked quite as pretty as the Grafton girls to-night, and I was quite proud of her, the way she behaved, enjoying herself, but never pushing herself forward, and everybody liking her and all."

"If you've quite finished, Gertrude," said the Vicar, as coldly as before, "I should like to say something. I'd no idea—no idea whatever—that it was on that young man's invitation that Mollie was there to-night and——"

"Oh, but it wasn't, dear. It was Nora who wrote to her. Of course *he* wouldn't have done it."

"Let me finish, please. Here is a young girl living, with her mother, almost under our protection. What-

ever friends they have made here they have made through us. I was glad enough for Mollie to be taken up by the Graftons, although she does not belong to their class by birth, and there is some danger of her thinking herself their equal in a way which *they* may perhaps come not to like, if she pushes it too far. That is why I wished her not to go to the Abbey too much, unless I, or you, were with her. I feel a responsibility towards the girl."

"But, Albert dear, surely it has got past that now! She's their friend just as much as we are. And they *love* having her there."

"Please let me finish, Gertrude. I know she's their friend, and now see what it has led to! By your own showing, Mrs. Pemberton doesn't even know Mrs. Walter. She is only *going* to call on her, because her daughter is going to *make* her. Yet, on the invitation of a young man, who has taken a fancy to her,—well, on his sister's invitation then, if you must be so particular, which *she*, this time, is *made to give*,—Mollie can so far forget herself as to go to the house of perfect strangers and be entertained by them. Why, it's lending herself to—to—I'd really rather not say what. To me it seems perfectly outrageous. Have you, I should like to ask, really looked upon Mollie in the light of a girl that any young man can throw down his glove to, and she'll pick it up?"

"Oh, *no*, Albert dear," expostulated Mrs. Mercer, greatly distressed by the suggestion. "It isn't like that at all. *She* isn't like that, and I'm sure *he* isn't

like that either. I was watching him at dinner, and afterwards, and I believe he really is in——"

"I don't want to hear any more," said the Vicar abruptly, throwing himself back in his seat and folding his arms. "I shall call on Mrs. Walter to-morrow and have it out with her—and with Mollie."

There was a toot of a big bass horn behind them, and the other car went sliding past. The three girls were sitting together as before, and waved gaily to them as they passed. Mrs. Mercer returned the greeting. The Vicar took no notice of it at all, and remained obstinately silent for the rest of the drive home.

CHAPTER XI

CAROLINE

Caroline awoke very early one morning in mid-July, disturbed perhaps by the light and the soft stillness. She had been in London during the week, where she had been wont to sleep late, in a darkened room. She had enjoyed her dinners and her plays and her parties, but she had a great sense of happiness and peace as she opened her eyes and realised that she was in London no longer, but in her large airy room at Abington, with the sweet fresh world of the country all about her, and no engagements of any sort before her that would prevent her from enjoying it.

The London season was over now; she had only spent the inside of three weeks away from Abington since they had first come there, and the days had seemed to go more quickly than at any time she had known. They had been contented and peaceful; she had never known a dull moment, with all the little tasks and pleasures she had found to her hand, not even when she and Barbara and Miss Waterhouse had been alone in the house together. The Saturdays and Sundays had been happy, with her father there, who seemed to belong to her now more than he had ever done, for many of her pleasures were his, and he shared her enjoyment of a life far simpler in its essence than any

she had known since she had grown up, or than he had known at any time within her experience. It had been quite exciting to look forward to the Friday evenings; and the guests who sometimes came down with him had filled all her desire for society other than that of her family, or the people she saw from the houses around.

And now they were going to live the life of their home together, at least for some weeks. Her father was giving himself one of his numerous holidays, and was going to spend it entirely at Abington. Beatrix was coming home after she had gone to Cowes and before she went to Scotland. Bunting would be home for his summer holidays in a week or so. It was a delightful prospect, and gave her more pleasure than she had gained from the after-season enjoyments of previous years. She had refused an invitation to Cowes, and another to Scotland. She might go up there later, perhaps. At present she wanted nothing but Abington —to feel that she belonged there, and her days would remain the same as long as she cared to look forward.

She rose and went to the window, just to look out on the sweetness of the early morning, and the flowers and the trees. As she stood there, she saw her father come round the corner of the house. He was dressed, untidily for him, in a grey flannel suit and a scarf round his neck instead of a collar, and he carried in one hand a wooden trug full of little pots and in the other a trowel. He was walking fast, as if he had business on hand.

Something impelled her to keep silent, and she drew back a little to watch him. He went down the broad central path of the formal garden on to which her windows looked, on his way to the new rock-garden, which had been another of their spring enterprises. He had brought down the night before some big cases of rock-plants, and had evidently not been able to wait to go out and play with them.

A very soft look came over Caroline's face as she watched him. She felt maternal. Men were so like babies, with their toys. And this was such a nice toy for the dear boy, and so different from the expensive grown-up toys he had played with before. He looked so young too, with his active straight-backed figure. At a back-view, with his hat hiding his hair, he might have been taken for quite a young man. And in mind he was one, especially when he was at home at Abington. There was none of all the young men with whom Caroline had made friends whom she liked better to be with, not only because she loved him, but because with none of them could she talk so freely or receive so much in return. There was nothing in her life about which she could not or did not talk to him. Francis Parry's proposal—she had not been at ease until she had told him about it and of all that was in her mind with regard to it. Surely they were nearer together than most fathers and daughters, and always would be so.

She thought she would go down and help him with his plantings and potterings. She loved him so much that she wanted to see that look of pleasure on his face that

she knew would come at the agreeable surprise she would bring him. Perhaps she would be able to steal up behind him without his seeing her, and then she would get this plain sign of his love for her and his pleasure in her unexpected appearance brought out of him suddenly. She had something more to tell him too.

She dressed and went down. She collected her garden gloves, a trowel and a trug, and then went into the empty echoing back regions where the cases of plants had been unpacked, and took out some more of the little pots. They were mostly thymes, in every creeping variety. She knew what he was going to do, then—furnish the rocky staircase, which he and two of the gardeners had built themselves, after the main part of the rock-garden had been finished and planted with professional assistance. It was rather late to be planting anything, but garden novices take little heed of seasons when they are once bitten with the planting and moving mania, and if some of the plants should be lost they could replace them before the next flowering season.

The clock in the church tower struck six as she let herself out into the dewy freshness of the garden. She had to go across the little cloistered court and all round the house, and she stood for a moment in front of it to look over the gentle undulations of the park, where the deer were feeding on the dew-drenched grass, and the bracken grew tall on the slopes sentinelled by the great beeches. She had never been able to make up her mind whether or not she liked the church and the

churchyard being so near the house. At first they had seemed to detract from its privacy, and from the front windows they certainly interfered with the view of the park hollows and glades, which were so beautiful in the varied lights in which they were seen. But as the weeks had gone by she had come to take in an added sense of the community of country life from their proximity. The villagers, all of whom she now knew by sight, and some of them intimately, came here every Sunday, and seemed to come more as friends, with the church almost a part of her own home. And some of them would come up sometimes to visit their quiet graves, to put flowers on them, or just to walk about among the friends whom they had known, now resting here. The names on many of the stones were alike, and families of simple stay-at-home cottagers could be traced back for generations. The churchyard was their book of honour; some personality lingered about the most far-away name that was commemorated in it. Caroline wished that her own mother could have been buried here. It would have been sweet to have tended her grave, and to have cherished the idea that she was not cut off from the warmth of their daily life. That was how the villagers must feel about those who were buried here. She felt it herself about an old man and a little child who had died since she had come to live at Abington. They were still a part of the great family.

She went on through the formal garden and across the grass to the disused quarry which was the scene of

her father's labours. It formed an ideal opportunity for rock-gardening, and was big enough to provide amusement for some time to come in gradual extension. He was half-way up the rocky stair he had made, very busy with his trowel and his watering-pot. As she came in sight of him he stood up to straighten his back, and then stepped back to consider the effect he had already made. This is one of the great pleasures of gardening, and working gardeners should not be considered slack if they occasionally indulge in it.

He turned and saw her as she crossed the grass towards him. She was not disappointed in the lightening of his face or the pleasure that her coming gave him. "Why, my darling!" he said. "I thought you'd be slumbering peacefully for another couple of hours. This *is* jolly!"

He gave her a warm kiss of greeting. She rubbed her soft cheek. "Its the first time I've ever known you to dress without shaving first," she said.

"Oh, I'm going to have a bath and a shave later on," he said. "This is the best time to garden. You don't mind how grubby you get, and you've got the whole world to yourself. Besides, I was dying to get these things in. How do you think it looks? Gives you an idea of what you're aiming at, doesn't it?

He stood at the foot of the stair and surveyed his handiwork critically, with his head on one side. She had again that impulse of half-maternal love towards him, and put her arm on his shoulder to give him another kiss. "I think it's beautiful, darling," she said.

"You're getting awfully clever at it. I don't think you've given the poor things enough water though. You really ought not to go planting without me."

"Well, it *is* rather a grind to keep on fetching water," he confessed. "I think we must get it laid on here. I'll tell you what we'll do this morning, Cara; we'll get hold of Worthing and see if we can't find a spring or a stream or something in the park that we can divert into this hollow. I've been planning it out. We might get a little waterfall, and cut out hollows in the rock for pools—have all sorts of luxuries. What do you think about it? I shouldn't do it till we'd worked it all out together."

In her mood of tenderness she was touched by his wanting her approval and connivance in his plan. "I think it would be lovely, darling," she said. "And it would give us lots to do for a long time to come."

They discussed the fascinating plan for some time, and then went on with their planting, making occasional journeys together for water, or for more pots from the cases. The sun climbed higher into the sky, and the freshness of the early morning wore off towards a hot still day. But it was still early when they had finished all that there was to be done, and the elaborate preparations of servants indoors for the washings and dressings and nibblings of uprising would not yet have begun.

"I'm going to sit down here and have a quiet pipe," said Grafton, seating himself on a jutting ledge of rock. "Room for you too, darling. We've had the best of the day. It's going to be devilish hot."

"I love the early morning," said Caroline. "But if we're going to do this very often I must make arrangements for providing a little sustenance. I'll get an electric kettle and make tea for us both. I don't think you ought to smoke, dear, before you've had something to eat."

"Oh, I've had some biscuits. Boned 'em out of the pantry. I say, old Jarvis keeps a regular little store of dainties there. There's some *pâté*, and all sorts of delicacies. Have some."

He took some biscuits out of his pocket, with toothsome pastes sandwiched between them, and Caroline devoured them readily, first delicately removing all traces of fluff that had attached itself to them. She was hungry and rather sleepy now, but enjoying herself exceedingly. It was almost an adventure to be awake and alive at a time when she would usually be sleeping. And certainly they had stolen the sweetest part of the day.

"Dad darling," she said, rather abruptly, after they had been silent for a time. "You know what I told you about Francis? Well, it's gone on this week, and he wants me to give him an answer now."

He came out of his reverie, which had had to do with the leading of water, and frowned a little. "What a tiresome fellow he is!" he said. "Why can't he wait?"

"He says he wouldn't mind waiting if there was anything to wait for. But he's got plenty of money, he says, to give me everything I ought to have, and he

wants me. What he says is that he wants me damnably."

"Oh, it's got to that, has it? He hasn't wanted you so damnably up till now. He's been hanging about you for years."

"He says he didn't know how much he loved me before," she said, half-unwillingly. "He found it out when he saw me here. I'm much nicer in the country than I was in London."

"I didn't see much difference. You've always been much the same to him."

"Oh, he didn't mean that. I'm a different person in the country. In London I'm one of the crowd; here I'm myself. Well, I feel that, you know. I am different. He thinks I'm much nicer. Do you think I'm much nicer, Dad?"

He put his hand caressingly on her neck. "You're always just what I want you," he said. "I'm not sure I don't want you damnably too. I should be lost here without you, especially with B so much away."

"Would you, darling? Well then, that settles it. I don't want to be married yet. I want to stay here with you."

As she was dressing, later on, she wondered exactly what it was that had made her take this sudden decision, and feel a sense of freedom and lightness in having taken it. She had not intended to refuse Francis definitely when she had gone out to her father a couple of hours before; but now she was going to do so. She liked him as much as ever—or thought she did. But

his importunities had troubled her a little during her week in London. They had never been such as to have caused her to reject advances for which she was not yet ready. He had made no claims upon her, but only asked for the right to make claims. Other young men from time to time in her two years' experience had not been so careful in their treatment of her; that was why she liked Francis better than any of those who had shown their admiration of her. And yet he had troubled her, with his quiet direct speech and his obvious longing for her, although she liked him so much, and had thought that in time she might give him what he wanted. Yes, she had thought she liked him well enough for that. She knew him; he was nice all through; they had much in common; they would never quarrel; he would never let her down. All that she had intended to ask her father was whether it was fair to Francis to keep him waiting, say for another year; or whether, if she did that, it was to be the engagement or the marriage that was to be thus postponed. But the question had been answered without having been asked. She did not want to marry him now, and she did not want to look forward to a future in which she might want to marry him. There was still the idea in her mind that if he asked her again, by and by, she might accept him; but for the present all she wanted was to be free, and not to have it hanging over her. So she would refuse him, definitely; what should happen in the future could be left to itself.

Oh, how nice it was to live this quiet happy country

life, and to know that it would go on, at least as far as she cared to look ahead! She had the companionship in it that she liked best in the world; she had everything to make her happy. And she was completely happy as she dressed herself, more carefully than before, though a trifle languid from the early beginning she had made of the day.

A message was sent over to the Estate Office to ask Worthing if he could come up as soon as possible in the morning. He came up at about half-past ten, and brought with him a young man who had arrived the day before to study land agency with him as his pupil.

"Maurice Bradby," he introduced him all round. "He's going to live with me for a bit if we find we get on well together, and learn all I can teach him. I thought I'd bring him up and introduce him. If I die suddenly in the night—as long as I don't do it before he's learnt his job—he'd be a useful man to take my place."

Bradby was a quiet-mannered rather shy young man of about five and twenty. He was tall and somewhat loose-limbed, but with a look of activity about him. He had a lot of dark hair, not very carefully brushed, and was dressed in Norfolk jacket and knickerbockers, conspicuous neither in style nor pattern. He fell to Barbara's lot to entertain, as Caroline was too interested in the quest upon which they set across the park to leave the company of her father and Worthing. Barbara found him nice, but uninteresting. She had to support most of the conversation herself, and had

almost exhausted her topics before they came to the stream in the woods which Worthing thought might be diverted into the rock-garden. Thereafter the young man fell into the background, but showed himself useful on the return journey in helping to gauge the slopes down which the water could best be led, and made one suggestion, rather diffidently, which Worthing accepted in preference to his own. Grafton said a few friendly words to him, and asked him to come and play lawn tennis in the afternoon, which invitation he gratefully but diffidently accepted.

There were two tennis courts at the Abbey, but there were a good many people to play on them that afternoon. Bradby played well, but when his turn came to sit out he hardly seemed to belong to the party, which included the Pemberton girls, and others who all knew one another, and showed it. He sat silent and awkward, until Caroline said to Barbara: "Do go and talk to Mr. Bradby; nobody's taking any trouble about him, and he's too shy to join in with the rest."

"Darling, I think you might take him on a bit yourself," expostulated Barbara. "I had him this morning, and he's frightfully dull. But I will if you like."

Caroline, disarmed by this amiability, 'took him on' herself, and finding him interested in flowers took him to see some. When she next spoke to Barbara she said: "I don't know why you say Mr. Bradby is dull. He's as keen as anything about gardening, and knows a lot too."

"Oh, of course if he likes *gardening!*" said Barbara.

"Well, he'll be a nice little friend for you, darling. I suppose we shall have to see a good lot of him if he's going to live with Uncle Jimmy, and I dare say we can make him useful when Bunting comes home. I think he's the sort who likes to make himself useful. Otherwise, I think he's rather a bore."

That being Barbara's opinion, it fell to Caroline's lot to entertain the young man again when he came to dine, with Worthing. He was too diffident to join in the general conversation, and was indeed somewhat of a wet-blanket on the cheerful talkative company. Miss Waterhouse exerted herself to talk to him during dinner, but stayed indoors afterwards when the rest of them went out into the garden. Caroline was too kind-natured and sweet-tempered to feel annoyance at having to devote herself to him, instead of joining in a general conversation, but she did think that if he were to be constantly at the house, as he could hardly help being, she had better encourage him to make himself more at home in their company. So she tried to draw him out about himself and had her reward; for he told her all his life's history, and in such a way as to make her like him, and to hope that he would be a welcome addition to their more intimate circle, when he succeeded in throwing off his shyness.

His story was simple enough. He was the youngest son of a clergyman, who had three other sons and four daughters. They had been brought up in the country, but when Maurice was fourteen his father had been given a living in a large Midland town. His three elder

brothers had obtained scholarships at good schools and afterwards at Oxford or Cambridge, and were doing well, one in the Woods and Forests Department, one as a schoolmaster, and one in journalism. He was the dunce of the family, he told Caroline, and after having been educated at the local Grammar School, he had been given a clerkship, at the age of eighteen, in a local bank. He had always hated it. He had wanted to emigrate and work with his hands, on the land, but his mother had dissuaded him. He was the only son at home, and two of the daughters had also gone out into the world. Finally a legacy had fallen to his father, which had enabled him to give his youngest son a new start in life. He was to learn land agency for a year. If he succeeded in making a living out of it after that time, he would stay in England. Otherwise, he was to be allowed his own way at last, and go out to Canada or Australia.

That was all. But he was at the very beginning of his new life now, and all ablaze, under his crust of shyness, with the joy of it. Caroline felt a most friendly sympathy with him. "I'm sure you will get on well if you are as keen as that," she said kindly. "I don't wonder at your hating being tied to an office if you love the country so. I love it too, and everything that goes on in it. And of all places in the world I love Abington. I think you're very lucky to have found Mr. Worthing to learn from, here."

CHAPTER XII

THE VICAR UNBURDENS HIMSELF

THE Vicar was taking tea at Surley Rectory, after the afternoon service. Old Mr. Cooper, the Rector of Surley, was over eighty, and getting infirm. His daughters took all the responsibility for 'running the parish' off his hands, but ecclesiastical law forbade their taking the services in church, which otherwise they would have been quite willing to do, and he had to call in help from among his colleagues for this purpose, when he was laid up. There was no one more ready to help him than the Vicar of Abington. His own service was in the evening, and he was always willing to take that at Surley in the afternoon.

The living of Surley was a 'plum,' in the gift of the Bishop of the diocese. It was worth, 'gross,' over a thousand a year, and although its emoluments had shrunk to a considerably lower figure, 'net,' its rector was still to be envied as being in possession of a good thing. There was a large house and an ample acreage of glebe, all very pleasantly situated, so that Surley Rectory had the appearance and all the appanages of a respectable-sized squire's house, and was only less in importance in the parish than Surley Park, which it somewhat resembled, though on a smaller scale. Mr.

Cooper had held it for close upon forty years, and had done very well out of it. His daughters would be well provided for, and if at any time he chose to retire he would have ample means, with the pension he would get from his successor, to end his days in the same sort of comfort as that in which he had lived there for so long. But he had become a little 'near' in his old age. He would not retire, although he was gradually getting past what little work he had to do himself, and he would not keep a curate. What he ardently wished was that his son, who had come to him late in life, should succeed him as Rector of Surley. Denis would be ready to be ordained in the following Advent, and would come to him as curate. If the old man managed to hang on for a few years longer it was his hope that Denis would so have established himself as the right man to carry on his work that he would be presented to the living. It was a fond hope, little likely of realisation. The Vicar of Abington was accustomed to throw scorn upon it when discussing the old man's ambitions with his wife. "If it were a question of private patronage," he said to her once after returning from Surley, "I don't say that it might not happen. But there would be an outcry if the Bishop were to give one of the best livings in his diocese to a young man who had done nothing to deserve it. Quite justifiably too. Livings like Surley ought to be given to incumbents in the diocese, who have borne the burden and heat of the day in the poorer livings. I'm quite sure the Bishop thinks the same. I was telling him the other day how

difficult it would be for a man to live here, and do his work as it ought to be done, unless he had private means behind him; and he said that men who took such livings ought to be rewarded. It's true that there are other livings in the diocese even poorer than this, but I was going through them the other day and I don't think there's a man holds any of them who would be suitable for Surley. There's a position to keep up there, and it could not be done, any more than this can, without private means. I don't suppose Mr. Cooper will last much longer. I fancy he's going a little soft in the head already. This idea that there's any chance of Denis succeeding him seems to indicate it."

The Vicar, however, did nothing to discourage the old man's hopes when he so kindly went over to take his duty for him. Nor did he even throw cold water upon those which the Misses Cooper shared with their father on their brother's behalf, but encouraged them to talk about the future, and showed nothing but sympathy with them in their wishes.

They talked about it now over the tea-table, in the large comfortably furnished drawing-room, which was so much better than the drawing-room at Abington Vicarage, but would look even better than it did now if it had the Abington Vicarage furniture in it, and a little money spent to increase it. Perhaps the carpet, which was handsome, though somewhat faded, and the curtains, which matched it well, might be taken over at a valuation if it should so happen that——

"I think dear father is a little easier," Rhoda was saying, as she poured tea out of an old silver tea-pot into cups that had belonged to her grandmother. "We shan't get him up yet awhile though, or let him out till the weather turns fine again. Denis will be home next Sunday, and he can take the services now, with his lay-reader's certificate."

"But I shall be delighted to come over in the afternoons until your father is better," said the Vicar. "It has been a great pleasure to me to help an old friend."

"I'm sure you've been *most* kind, Mr. Mercer," said Ethel. "Later on, when Denis has to go back for his last term, we may have to call on you again. But it won't be for long now. When Denis is once ordained and settled down here we shall breathe again."

"I believe father will be better altogether when that happens," said Rhoda. "He can't get it out of his head that he may die before Denis is ready to take his place. I don't think there's *any* danger of it, but naturally, it depresses him. I'm *afraid*, if anything so dreadful were to happen, one could hardly expect the Bishop to keep the living open for Denis until he's priested. Do you think so, Mr. Mercer?"

"I shouldn't let the old gentleman think it *couldn't* happen, if I were you," said the Vicar.

"Oh, no; we do all we can to keep up his hopes. If only we could get the Bishop to make him some sort of a promise!"

"He won't do that, I'm afraid," said the Vicar.

"No, I'm afraid not. Did you know, Mr. Mercer, that Mrs. Carruthers was the Bishop's niece?"

"No, I didn't know that. Are you sure?"

"Yes; he told us so himself when Ethel and I went to call at the Palace. It was a little awkward for us, for, of course, they asked about her. But we were able to say that she had been abroad for some months, which, of course, they knew. So the subject passed off. But they are evidently rather fond of her, and when she comes back I think it is quite likely that they will come to stay with her."

This news wanted digesting. The Bishop of Medchester had only recently been appointed, and it would be rather an advantage to the neighbouring clergy for him to come amongst them more often than he would otherwise have done. But there were certain difficulties to be anticipated, since the lady who would attract him there had broken off relations with the clergy of her own parish, and the next.

It seemed already, however, to have been digested by the Misses Cooper. "We shall make friends with her again when she comes back," said Rhoda calmly. "We *did* make a mistake on the subject we quarrelled about, and there's no good saying we didn't. She behaved in a very unladylike way about it—I *must* say that; but if *we* can forgive it, and let bygones be bygones, I suppose *she* can. If she wished, she could probably do something to influence the Bishop about Denis. Denis had nothing to do with the cause of dispute, and used to be asked to the Park a good deal before we left off

going there altogether. She always liked him, and in fact wanted to keep friends with him after she had been so rude to us; just as she did with father. That, of course, we couldn't have; but if we are all ready to make friends together again the objection will be removed. I think it is likely that her relationship to the Bishop will count for a good deal when it becomes necessary to appoint somebody to succeed dear father."

It did, indeed, seem likely. The Bishop, who was well connected, and thought to be a trifle worldly, had already, during his short term of office, instituted one incumbent on the recommendation of the Squire of the parish. The living was not a particularly good one, and the man was suitable; but there was the precedent. The betting, if there had been such a thing, on young Cooper's succeeding his father, would have gone up several points, on the relationship of Mrs. Carruthers to the Bishop becoming known.

"Personally," said the Vicar, "I was always inclined to like Mrs. Carruthers. I confess I was disturbed—even offended—when she refused to see me after her husband's death. But one can make excuses for a woman at such a time. One must not bear malice."

"Oh, no," said Rhoda. "Let's all forgive and forget. She is coming back in September, I believe. I should think you might see a good deal of her over at Abington, Mr. Mercer. She is bound to make friends with the Graftons. They're just her sort. Two very lively houses we have in our parishes, haven't we? Always somebody coming and going! I can't say I shall

be sorry to be friends with Mrs. Carruthers again. It does cheer one up to see people from outside occasionally."

"Personally, I don't much care for this modern habit of week-end visiting in country houses," said Ethel. "It means that people are taken up with guests from outside and don't see so much of their neighbours. In old Mr. Carruthers's time, they had their parties, for shooting and all that, but there were often people who stayed for a week or two, and one got to know them. And, of course, when the family was here alone, there was much more coming and going between our two houses. It was much more friendly."

"I agree with you," said the Vicar. "And the clergyman of the parish *ought* to be the chief friend of his squire, if his squire is of the right sort. Unfortunately, nowadays, he so often isn't."

"But *you* haven't much to complain about, have you, Mr. Mercer?" enquired Rhoda. "I have always thought you got on so extremely well with the Graftons."

"We have often envied you having such a nice house to run in and out of," said Ethel, "when you told us how welcome they made you. Especially with those pretty girls there," she added archly.

"We've thought sometimes that you were rather inclined to forsake *old* friends for their sake," said Rhoda.

The Vicar was dragged by two opposing forces. On the one hand he was unwilling to destroy the impression that he was hand in glove with the family of his

squire; on the other hand the wounds of vanity needed consolation. But these *were* old friends and would no doubt understand, and sympathise.

"To tell you the truth they haven't turned out quite as well as I hoped they might at the beginning," he said. "There are a good many things I don't like about them, although in others I am perhaps, as you say, fortunate."

Rhoda and Ethel pricked up their ears. This was as breath to their nostrils.

"Well, now you've said it," said Rhoda, "I'll confess that we have sometimes wondered how long your infatu—your liking for the Graftons would last. They're not at all the sort of people *we* should care to have living next door to us."

"Far from it," said Ethel. "But, of course, we couldn't say anything as long as they seemed to be so important to *you*."

"What is there that you particularly object to in them?" asked the Vicar in some surprise. "I thought you did like them when you went over there at first."

"At first, yes," said Rhoda; "except that youngest one, Barbara. She pretended to be very polite, but she seemed to be taking one off all the time."

"I know what you mean," said the Vicar uneasily. "I've sometimes almost thought the same myself. But I think it's only her manner. Personally I prefer her to the other two. She isn't so pretty, but——"

"I don't deny Caroline and Beatrix's prettiness," said Rhoda. "Some girls might say they couldn't see

it, but thank goodness I'm not a cat. Still, good looks, to please *me*, must have something behind them, or I've no use for them."

"They're ill-natured—ill-natured and conceited," said Ethel. "That's what they are, and that's what spoils them. And the way they go on with their father! 'Darling' and 'dearest' and hanging round him all the time! It's all show-off. They don't act in that way to others."

"I dare say Mr. Mercer wishes they did," said Rhoda, who was not altogether without humour, and also prided herself on her directness of speech.

"Indeed not!" said the Vicar indignantly. "I quite agree with Miss Ethel. I dislike all that petting and kissing in company."

"I only meant that they are not so sweet as all that inside," said Ethel. "I'm sure Rhoda and I did our best to make friends with them. They are younger than we are, of course, and we thought they might be glad to be taken notice of and helped to employ and interest themselves. But not at all. Oh, no. They came over here once, and nothing was good enough for them. They wouldn't do this, and they didn't care about doing that, and hadn't time to do the other. At last I said, 'Whatever *do* you do with yourselves then, all day long? Surely,' I said, 'you take some interest in your fellow-creatures!'—we'd wanted them to do the same sort of thing at Abington as we do here, and offered to bicycle over there as often as they liked to help and advise them. Caroline looked at me, and said

in a high and mighty sort of way, 'Yes we do; but we like making friends with them by degrees.' Well now, I call that simply shirking. If *we* had tried to run this parish on those lines—well, it wouldn't be the parish it is; that's all I can say."

"They are of very little use in the parish," said the Vicar. "I tried to get them interested when they first came, and asked them to come about with me and see things for themselves, but I've long since given up all idea of that. And none of them will teach in the Sunday-school, where we really want teachers."

"Yes, I suppose you do," said Rhoda. "Until Mollie Walter came I suppose you had hardly anybody. How do they get on with Mollie Walter, by the by? Or *don't* they get on. She'd hardly be good enough for them, I suppose."

"Far from that," said the Vicar, "they are spoiling Mollie completely. She used to be such a nice simple modest girl; well, you often said yourselves that you would like to have a girl like that to help you in the parish."

"Yes, we did," said Ethel. "And she used to be so pleased to come over here and to be told how to do things. Now I think of it she hardly ever does come over now. So that's the reason, is it? Taken up by the Graftons and had her head turned. Well, all I can say is that when she does deign to come over here again, or we go and see her, we shan't stand any nonsense of *that* sort. If she wants a talking to she can get it here."

"I wish you *would* talk to her," said the Vicar. "I've tried to do so, seeing her going wrong, and thinking it my duty; but she simply won't listen to me now. They've entirely altered her, and I whom she used to look up to almost as a father am nothing any more, beside them."

"That's too bad," said Rhoda. "And you used to make such a pet of her."

"Well, I don't know that I ever did that," said the Vicar. "Of course I was fond of the child, and tried to bring her out; but I was training her all the time, to make a good useful woman of her. Her mother was grateful to me for it, I know, and she herself has often told me what a different life it was for her from the one she had been living, and how happy she was at Abington in their little cottage, and having us as their friends. Well she might be too! We've done everything for that girl, and this is the return. I haven't yet told you what disturbs me so much. You know how I dislike those noisy rackety Pembertons."

"Why I thought you were bosom friends with them again," said Rhoda. "Mr. Brill came over the other day—Father Brill I refuse to call him—and said he had met you and Mrs. Mercer dining there."

"Oh, one must dine with one's neighbours occasionally," said the Vicar, "unless one wants to cut one's self off from them entirely. Besides, I thought I'd done them an injustice. Mrs. Pemberton had done me the honour to consult me about certain good works that she was engaged in, and I did what I could, naturally,

to be helpful and to interest myself. Why she did it I don't know, considering that when I took the trouble to bicycle over there last I was informed that she was not at home, although, if you'll believe me, there was a large party there, the Graftons and Mollie among them, playing tennis."

"Mollie! I didn't know *she* knew the Pembertons! She *is* getting on! No wonder her head's turned!"

"What I wanted to tell you was that young Pemberton met her at the Abbey some time ago, when the Graftons first came, and took a fancy to her. It was *he* who got her asked over to Grays, and she actually went there before Mrs. Pemberton had called on Mrs. Walter. Now I ask you, is that the proper way for a girl to behave?"

"Well, you haven't told us how she does behave yet," said Rhoda. "Has she taken a fancy to young Pemberton? It would be a splendid match for her."

The Vicar made an exclamation of impatience. "Is it likely, do you think, that he has anything of that sort in his head?" he asked. "He's just amusing himself with a pretty girl, and thinks he can do what he likes with her, because she's beneath him in station. It makes my blood boil. And there's the girl lending herself to it—in all innocence, of course; I know that—and nobody to give her a word of warning."

"Haven't you given her a word of warning?" asked Ethel.

"I tried to do so. But she misunderstood me. I've

said that it's all innocence on *her* part. And it's difficult for a man to advise in these matters."

"Couldn't Mrs. Mercer?"

"My wife doesn't see quite eye to eye with me in this, unfortunately. She thinks I made a mistake in mentioning the matter to Mollie at all. Perhaps it would have been better if I'd left it to her. But she couldn't do anything now."

"Couldn't you say anything to Mrs. Walter?"

"I did that. She was there when I talked to Mollie. I'm sorry to say that she took offence. I ought really to have talked to them separately. They listened to what I had to say at first, and seemed quite to realise that a mistake had been made in Mollie going over to Grays in that way before Mrs. Pemberton had called on Mrs. Walter. It was even doubtful at that time whether she *would* call on her, although she did so afterwards. But when I mentioned young Pemberton, they simply wouldn't listen to me. Mollie went out of the room with her head in the air, and Mrs. Walter took the line that I had no right to interfere with the girl at all in such matters as that. Why, those are the very matters that a man of the world, as I suppose one can be as well as being a Christian, ought to counsel a girl about, if he's on such terms with her as to stand for father or brother, as I have been with Mollie. Don't you think I'm right?"

"Well, I don't know," said Rhoda. "If she'd just taken it naturally, and hadn't been thinking of any harm, it *would* be likely to offend her to have it put

to her in that way; especially if she was inclined to like him and didn't know it yet."

"Perhaps it was a mistake," the Vicar admitted again. "I suppose I ought to have talked to Mrs. Walter first. But they had both been so amenable in the way they had taken advice from me generally, in things that they couldn't be expected to know about themselves, and so grateful for my friendship and interest in them, that it never occurred to me not to say exactly what I thought. One lives and learns. There's very little *real* gratitude in the world. Mollie has got thoroughly in with the Graftons now, and all *I*'ve done for her goes for nothing, or very little. And even Mrs. Walter has laid herself out to flatter and please them, in a way I didn't think it was in her to do. She is always running after Miss Waterhouse, and asking her to the Cottage. They both pretend that nothing is altered—she and Mollie—but it's plain enough that now they think themselves on a level with the Graftons—well, they have got where they want to be and can kick down the ladder that led them there. That's about what it comes to, and I can't help feeling rather sore about it. Well, I've unburdened myself to you, and it's done me good. Of course you'll keep what I say to yourselves."

"Oh, of course," said Rhoda. "Confidences with us are sacred. Then Mollie still goes over to Grays? Her mother lets her?"

"She goes over with the Graftons. I don't fancy she has been by herself; but I never ask. I don't men-

tion the subject at all, and naturally they would be ashamed of bringing it up themselves before me."

"The Grafton girls back her up, of course!"

"I'm afraid they do. And I hardly like to say it, or even to think it, but Mollie must have given them quite a wrong impression of what was said after she had dined at Grays with them. There is a difference in their behaviour towards me, and I can hardly help putting it down to that. I used to get such a warm welcome at the Abbey, whenever I liked to go there. I could always drop in for a cup of tea, or at any time of the day, and know that they were pleased to see me. When their father was up in town I may have been said really to have looked after them, as was only natural under the circumstances, and everybody was glad to have it so. But now it is entirely different. There is a stiffness; a formality. I no longer feel that I am the chosen friend of the family. And I'm bound to put it down to Mollie. I go in there sometimes and find her with them, and—oh, but it's no use talking about it. I must say, though, that it's hard that everything should be upset for me just because I have not failed in my duty. Standing as I do, for the forces of goodness and righteousness in the parish, it's a bitter disappointment to have my influence spoilt in this fashion; and when at first I had expected something so different."

"Mr. Grafton seldom goes to church, does he?"

"He has disappointed me very much in that way. I thought he would be my willing helper in my work.

But he has turned out quite indifferent. And not only that. Barbara would have been confirmed this year if they had been in London. They told me that themselves. Of course I offered to prepare her for confirmation myself, as they decided to stay here. They shilly-shallied about it for some time, but a fortnight ago Miss Waterhouse informed me that she would not be confirmed till next year."

"That's not right," said Ethel decisively. "She ought to have been confirmed long ago."

The Vicar got up to leave. "I'm afraid they've very little sense of religion," he said. "Well, one must work on, through good report and ill report. Some day, perhaps, one will get the reward of all one's labours. Good-bye, dear ladies. It has done me good to talk it all over with you. And it is a real joy to rest for a time in such an atmosphere as this. I will come again next Sunday."

They saw him to the hall door and watched him ride off on his bicycle. Then they returned in some excitement to the drawing-room.

"The fact is that he's put his foot in it, and had a sound snub," said Rhoda.

"He's behaved like a fool about Mollie, and now he's as jealous as a cat because she's left him for somebody else," said Ethel.

CHAPTER XIII

A LETTER

George Grafton got up one morning in August at six o'clock, as was his now almost invariable custom, and went to the window. The rain, which had begun on the evening before, was coming down steadily. It looked as if it had rained all night and would continue to rain all day. Pools had already collected in depressions of the road, the slightly sunken lawn under his window was like a marsh, and the trees dripped heavily and dismally.

He was greatly disappointed. For nearly a month now he had been hard at work on the rock-garden and the stream that had been led into it. It had been a fascinating occupation, planning and contriving and doing the work himself with no professional guidance, and only occasional extra labour to lift or move very heavy stones. He had worked at it nearly every morning before breakfast, with Caroline and Barbara, Bunting, and Beatrix when she had been at home, and Maurice Bradby, Worthing's pupil, as an ardent and constant helper both with brain and with hands. They had all enjoyed it immensely. Those early hours had been the best in the day. The hard work had made him as fit as he had ever been in his life, and he felt like a young man again.

As he stood at the window, Bradby came splashing up the road in mackintosh and heavy boots. He was as keen as the rest, and generally first in the field.

"Hallo!" Grafton called out to him. "I'm afraid there's nothing doing this morning. I don't mind getting a little wet, but this is a bit too much."

Bradby looked round him at the leaden sky, which showed no signs of a break anywhere. "Perhaps it will clear up," he said. "I didn't suppose you'd be out, but I thought I might as well come up. I want to see what happens with the pipes, and where the water gets to with heavy rain."

"Well, you go up and have a look, my boy," said Grafton, "and if you're not drowned beforehand come to breakfast. We might be able to get out afterwards. I'm going back to bed now."

He went back to bed and dozed intermittently until his servant came in to call him. The idle thoughts that filled his brain, waking and half-sleeping, were concerned with the rock-garden, with the roses he and Caroline had planted, with other plantings of flowers and shrubs, and the satisfaction that he had already gained or expected to gain from them. The garden came first. In the summer it provided the chief interest of the country, and the pleasure it had brought was at least as great as that to be gained from the sports of autumn and winter. But it was not only the garden as giving these pleasures of contrivance, expectation and satisfaction, that coloured his thoughts as he lay drowsily letting them wander over the aspects of the

life he was so much enjoying. It was the great playground, in these rich summer months, when he had usually shunned the English country as lying in its state of quiescence, and affording none of the distractions to be found elsewhere. Lawn tennis and other garden games, with the feeling of fitness they induced, the companionship they brought in the long afternoons when people came to play and talk and enjoy themselves, and the consequent heightening of the physical satisfaction of meals, cool drinks, baths, changing of clothes; the lazy hours in the heat of the day, with a book, or family chat in the shade of a tree, with the bees droning among the flowers in the soaking sunshine, and few other sounds to disturb the peace and the security; the intermittent wanderings to look at this or that which had been looked at a score of times before, but was always worth looking at again—those garden hours impressed themselves upon the memory, sliding into one another, until the times of rain and storm were forgotten, and life seemed to be lived in the garden, in the yellow sunshine or the cool green shade.

The influence of the garden extended itself to the house in these summer days. This room in which he was lying—it was a joy to wake up in it in the morning—to be awakened by the sun pouring in beams of welcome and invitation; it was a satisfaction to lie down in it at night, flooded with the fragrant air that had picked up sweetness and freshness from the trees and the grass. The stone hall was cool and gratefully dim, when one came in out of the heat and glare of the

hottest hours of the day. The long low library between the sunk lawn and the cloister court, whose calf-bound treasures, which he never looked into, gave it a mellow retired air, was a pleasant room in which to write the few letters that had to be written or do the small amount of business that had to be done; or, when there were men in the house, to give them their refreshments or their tobacco in. The long gallery was a still pleasanter room, facing the setting sun and the garden and the trees, with a glimpse of the park, and nothing to be seen from its deep-recessed windows but those surrounding cultivated spaces. All the rooms of the house were pleasant rooms, and pervaded with that sense of retired and gracious beauty which came from their outlook, into garden or park or ancient court.

The rain showed signs of decreasing at breakfast-time, and there were some ragged fringes to be seen in the grey curtain of cloud that had overhung the dripping world. Bradby had not put in his appearance. Although he was now made as welcome as anybody when he came to the Abbey, and had proved himself of the utmost assistance in many of the pursuits that were carried on there with such keenness, his diffidence still hung to him. Perhaps the invitation had not been clear enough; he would not come, except at times when it was clearly expected of him, or to meals, without a clearly understood invitation.

Young George clamoured for him during breakfast. His father had announced a morning with letters and

papers, too long postponed. Young George wanted somebody to play with, and Bradby, after his father, and now even before Barbara, was his chosen companion.

"He has work to do, you know, Bunting," said Caroline. "He can't always be coming here."

"He may be going about the estate," said Young George. "I shall go down to the office after breakfast."

"Why don't you go over and see Jimmy Beckley?" asked Barbara. "You could ride. I'll come with you, if you like, and the Dragon will let me. I should like to see Vera and the others."

Bunting thought he would. It would be rather fun to see old Jimmy, and it would be certain to clear up by the time they got to Feltham.

"I believe it is going to clear up," said Grafton, looking out of the window. "Shall you and I ride too, Cara? I must write a few letters. They're getting on my mind now; but we could start about eleven."

So it was agreed. They stood at the hall door after breakfast and looked at the rain. Then Grafton went into the library, and was soon immersed in his writing. Even that was rather agreeable, for a change. It was so quiet and secluded in this old book-lined room. And there was the ride to come, pleasant to look forward to even if it continued to rain, trotting along the muddy roads, between the hedges and trees and fields, and coming back with the two girls and the boy to a lunch that would have been earned by exercise. Everything was pleasant in this quiet easy life, of which the

present hour's letter-writing and going through of papers was the only thing needed to keep the machinery going, at least by him. It was only a pity that B wasn't there. He missed B, with her loving merry ways, and she did love Abington, and the life there, as much as any of them. He would write a line to his little B, up in Scotland, before he went out, and tell her that he wanted her back, and she'd better come quickly. She couldn't be enjoying herself as much as she would if she came home, to her ever loving old Daddy.

The second post came in just as he had finished. Caroline had already looked in to say that she was going up to change. He took the envelopes and the papers from old Jarvis, and looked at certain financial quotations before going through the letters. There was only one he wanted to open before going upstairs. It was from Beatrix—a large square envelope addressed in an uneven rather sprawling hand, not yet fully formed.

Caroline waited for him in the hall. The horses were being led up and down outside. He was usually a model of punctuality, but she was already considering going up to see what had happened to him when he came down the shallow stairs, in his breeches and gaiters.

"What a time you've been!" she said.

He did not reply, and had his back to her as old Jarvis helped him on with his raincoat and handed him his gloves and crop. She did not notice that there was anything wrong with him until they were mounted and had set off. Then she saw his face and exclaimed

in quick alarm: "What's the matter, darling? Aren't you well?"

His voice was not like his as he replied: "I've had a letter from B. She says she's engaged to Lassigny."

Caroline had to use her brain quickly to divine how such a piece of news would affect him. But for his view of it, it would have been only rather exciting. She knew Lassigny, and liked him. "I didn't know he was there," she said lamely.

"She hadn't told me that he was," he said. "I suppose he went up there after her—got himself an invitation. He's staying in the house."

"I don't think he'd do anything underhand, Dad."

"I don't say it would be underhand. If he hasn't done that he must have been invited with all the rest, and she must have known it. But she never said so."

Caroline was disturbed at the bitterness with which he spoke, and did not quite understand it. He had made no objections to Lassigny as a friend of hers, nor to her having asked him to Abington at Whitsuntide. He seemed to have liked him himself. What was it that he was so upset about? Was it with Beatrix?"

"Do you think she ought not to have accepted him without asking you first, darling?" she said. "I suppose she does ask your permission."

"No, she doesn't. She takes it for granted. She's engaged to him, and hopes I shall be as happy about it as she is. He's going to write to me. But there's no letter from him yet."

"I think she ought to have asked your permission.

But I suppose when that sort of thing comes to you suddenly——"

"*He* ought certainly to have asked my permission," he interrupted her.

"Oh, but darling! You hardly expect that in these days, do you? He's seen her everywhere; he's been invited here. It would be enough, wouldn't it?—if he writes to you at once. Francis didn't ask you before he asked me; and you didn't mind."

"Francis is an Englishman. This fellow's a Frenchman. Things aren't done in that way in France."

'This fellow!' She didn't understand his obvious hostility. Did he know anything against Lassigny. If so, surely he must have found it out quite lately.

"Why do you object to the idea so much, darling? I think he's nice."

"Oh, nice!" he echoed. "I told you the other day that I should hate the idea of one of you marrying a foreigner."

He had told her that, and she had replied that Lassigny hardly seemed like a foreigner. It was no good saying it again. She wanted to soothe him, and to help him if she could.

"What shall you do?" she asked.

"I'm going to wire to her to come home at once—send a wire now."

He turned aside on to the grass, and then cantered down to the gate. Caroline would have wished to discuss it further before he took the step he had announced, but, although she was on terms of such

equality with him, she had never yet questioned a decision of his when he had announced one. His authority, so loosely exercised over his children, was yet paramount.

They rode into the village without exchanging more words, and he dismounted at the Post-Office, while she held his horse.

Worthing came out of the Estate Office, which was nearly opposite, to speak to her. She found it difficult to chat to him about nothing, and to keep a bright face, but he relieved her of much of the difficulty, for he never had any himself in finding words to pass the time with.

"And how's Beatrix getting on?" he asked. "Heard from her since she's been up on the moors?"

"Father had a letter from her this morning," she said. "He wants her home." This, at least, would prepare the way for the unexpected appearance of Beatrix.

"Oh, we all want her home," he said.

Grafton came out of the office, still with the dark look on his face, which was usually so smiling and contented. It cleared for a moment as he greeted Worthing, who had a word or two to say to him about estate matters. Suddenly Grafton said: "I should like to talk to you about something. Give me some lunch, will you? We shall be back about one. Send young Bradby down to us. I'll eat what's prepared for him."

When he had mounted again he said to Caroline, "I'm going to talk it over with Worthing. One wants

a man's opinion on these matters, and his is sound enough."

She felt a trifle hurt, without quite knowing why. "If you find it's all right, you're not going to stop it, are you?" she asked.

"How can it be all right?" he asked with some impatience, which hurt her still more, for he never used that tone with her.

"I mean, if they love each other."

"Oh, love each other!" he exclaimed. "She's hardly out of the nursery. A fellow like that—years older than she is, but young enough to make himself attractive—*he* knows how to make love to a young girl, if he wants to. Had plenty of practice, I dare say."

It was an unhappy ride for Caroline. His mood was one of bitterness, chiefly against Lassigny, but also against Beatrix—though with regard to her it was shot with streaks of tenderness. At one time, he ought not to have let her go away without seeing that there was somebody to look after her and prevent her from getting into mischief—but he had trusted her, and never thought she'd do this sort of thing; at another, she was so young and so pretty that she couldn't be expected to know what men were like. Poor little B! If only he'd kept her at home a bit longer! She was always happy enough at home.

To Caroline, with her orderly mind, it seemed that there were only two questions worth discussing at all—whether there was any tangible objection to Lassigny as a husband for Beatrix, and, if her father's objec-

tions to her marrying him were so strong, what he proposed to do. She had inherited this orderliness of mind from him. As a general rule he went straight to the heart of a subject, and all subsidiary considerations fell into their proper place. But she could not get an answer to either of these questions, though with regard to the latter he seemed to consider it of great importance to get Beatrix home and talk to her. This would have been very well if it had simply meant that he wanted to find out whether she had pledged herself lightly, and, if he thought she had, do all he could to dissuade her. Or if there had been anything he could have brought up against Lassigny, which might have affected her, other than his being a foreigner, which certainly wouldn't. He never said that he would forbid the marriage, nor even that he would postpone it for a certain period, both of which he could have done until Beatrix should come of age.

Longing as she did to put herself in line with him whenever she could, she allowed his feelings against Lassigny to affect her. There was nothing tangible. He knew nothing against him—hardly anything about him, indeed, except what all the world of his friends knew. With an Englishman in the same position it would have been quite enough. From a worldly point of view the match would be unexceptionable. There was wealth as well as station, and the station was of the sort that would be recognised in England, under the circumstances of Lassigny's English tastes and English sojourns. But that side of it was never men-

tioned. She had the impression of Lassigny as something different from what she had ever known him—with something dark and secret in his background, something that would soil Beatrix, or at least bring her unhappiness in marriage. And yet it was nothing definite. When she asked him directly if he knew anything against him, he answered her impatiently again. Oh, no. The fellow was a Frenchman. That was all he needed to know.

They were no nearer to anything, and she was no nearer to him, when they arrived at Feltham Hall. When they had passed through the lodge gates he suddenly said that he would ride back alone. She would be all right with Barbara and Bunting.

He turned and rode off, with hardly a good-bye to her.

Worthing lived in comfortable style in an old-fashioned farmhouse, which had been adapted to the use of a gentleman of quality. The great kitchen had been converted into a sitting-room, the parlour made a convenient dining-room, and there were four or five oak-raftered lattice-windowed bedrooms, with a wider view over the surrounding country than was gained from any window of the Abbey, which lay rather in a hollow. As Grafton waited for his host, walking about his comfortable bachelor's room, or sitting dejectedly by the open window looking out on to the rain, which had again begun to come down heavily, he was half-inclined to envy Worthing his well-placed congenial existence. A bachelor—if he were a bachelor by tem-

perament—lived a life free of care. Such troubles as this that had so suddenly come to disturb his own more elaborate life he was at least immune from.

He was glad to have Worthing to consult with. Among all his numerous friends there was none to whom he would have preferred to unburden himself. Sometimes a man of middle-age, whose friendships are for the most part founded on old associations, comes across another man with whom it is as easy to become intimate as it used to be with all and sundry in youth: and when that happens barriers fall even more easily than in youthful friendships. Grafton had found such a man in Worthing. He was impatient for his arrival. He was so unused to bearing mental burdens, and wanted to share this one. Caroline had brought him little comfort. He did not think of her, as he waited for Worthing to come in; while she, riding home with Barbara and Bunting, and exerting herself to keep them from suspecting that there was anything wrong with her, was thinking of nobody but him.

He told Worthing what he had come to tell him the moment he came in. He remembered that fellow Lassigny who had stayed with them at Whitsuntide. Well, he had had a letter from Beatrix to say that she was engaged to him. He was very much upset about it. He had wired to Beatrix to come home at once.

Worthing disposed his cheerful face to an expression of concern, and said, "Dear, dear!" in a tone of deep sympathy. But it was plain that he did not quite understand why his friend should be so upset.

"I never expected anything of the sort," said Grafton. "He ought to have come to me first; or at least she ought to have asked my permission before announcing that she'd engaged herself to him. I suppose she's told everybody up there. I'm going to have her home."

"She's very young," said Worthing tentatively.

"I wouldn't have minded that if he had been the right sort of fellow. How can I let a girl of mine marry a Frenchman, Worthing?"

Lunch was announced at that moment. Worthing took Grafton up to his room to wash his hands, and he expressed his disturbance of mind and the reasons for it still further until they came downstairs again, without Worthing saying much in reply, or indeed being given an opportunity of doing so. It was not until they were seated at lunch and the maid had left the room that Worthing spoke to any purpose.

"Well, of course, you'd rather she married an Englishman," he said. "And I suppose it's a bit of a shock to you to find that she wants to marry anybody, as young as she is. But do you know anything against this chap? He isn't a wrong 'un, is he? You rather talk as if he were. But you had him down here to stay. You let him be just as friendly with the girls as anybody else."

He spoke with some decision, as if he had offered enough sympathy with a vague grievance, and wanted it specified if he was to help or advise as to a course to be taken. It was what Caroline had been trying to get at, and had not been able to.

"Can't you understand?" asked Grafton, also with more decision in his speech than he had used before. "You don't go abroad much, I know. But I suppose you've read a few French novels."

Worthing looked genuinely puzzled. "I can't say I have," he said. "Jorrocks is more in my line. But what are you driving at?"

"Don't you know how men in France are brought up to look at women? They don't marry like we do, and they don't lead the same lives after they're married. At least men of Lassigny's sort don't."

Worthing considered this. "You mean you don't think he's fit for her?" he said judicially.

Grafton did not reply to his question in direct terms. "He's three or four and thirty," he said. "He's lived the life of his sort, in Paris, and elsewhere. It's been so natural to him that he wouldn't affect to hide it if I asked him about it. It wouldn't be any good if he did. If I liked to go over to Paris and get among the people who know him, there'd be all sorts of stories I could pick up for the asking. Nobody would think there was any disgrace in them—for him. What does a fellow like that—a fellow of that age, with all those experiences behind him—what does he want with my little B? Damn him!"

This was very different from the rather pointless complaints that had gone before. Worthing did not reply immediately. His honest simple mind inclined him towards speech that should not be a mere shirking of the question. But it was difficult. "I don't sup-

pose there are many fellows, either French or English, you'd want to marry your daughters to, if you judged them in that way," he said quietly.

Grafton looked at him. "I shouldn't have thought *you'd* have taken that line," he said.

"I don't know much about the French," Worthing went on. "I've heard fellows say that they do openly what we do in the dark. Far as I'm concerned, it's outside my line of life altogether. I've had all I wanted with sport, and a country life, and being on friendly terms with a lot of people. Still, you don't get to forty-five without having looked about you a bit. I believe there are more fellows like me than you'd think to hear a lot of 'em talk; but you know there are plenty who aren't. They do marry nice girls, and make 'em good husbands too."

Grafton looked down on his plate, with a frown on his face. Then he looked up again. "That doesn't corner me," he said. "The right sort of man makes a new start when he marries—with us. Fellows like that don't pretend to, except just for a time perhaps—until —Oh, I can't talk about it. It's all too beastly—to think of her being looked upon in that way. I'm going to stop it. I've made up my mind. I won't consent; and she can't marry without my consent."

CHAPTER XIV

LASSIGNY

Beatrix's answer to his telegram came that afternoon.

"Don't want to come home yet Please let me stay Am writing much love."

This angered him. It was a defiance; or so it struck him. He went down to the Post-Office himself, and sent another wire.

"Come up by morning train will meet you in London."

The rain had ceased. As he walked back over the muddy path that led through the park, the evening sun shone through a rift in the clouds, and most of the sky was already clear again. How he would have enjoyed this renewal of life and sunshine the evening before! But his mind was as dark now as the sky had been all day, and the relenting of nature brought it no relief.

Barbara and Bunting were out in the park with their mashies and putters, on the little practice course he had laid out. He kept the church between himself and them as he neared the house. They already knew that there was something amiss, and were puzzled and disturbed about it. In his life that had gone so smoothly there had never been anything to make him shun the

company of his children, or to spoil their pleasure in his society, because of annoyance that he could not hide from them. He must tell them something—or perhaps Caroline had better—or Miss Waterhouse. He didn't want to tell them himself. It would make too much of it. Beatrix was going to be brought home; but not in disgrace. He didn't want that. She would be disappointed at first; but she would get over it, and they would all be as happy together as before. His thoughts did lighten a little as they dwelt for a moment on that.

He called for Caroline when he got into the house. He felt some compunction about her. He had taken her into his confidence, and then he had seemed to withdraw it, though he had not meant to do so. Of course he couldn't have told her the grounds of his objections to Lassigny as he had told them to Worthing, but he owed it to her to say at least what he was going to do. She had been very sweet to him at tea-time, trying her best to keep up the usual bright conversation, and to hide from the children that there was anything wrong with him, which he had not taken much trouble to hide himself. And she had put her hand on his knee under the table, to show him that she loved him and had sympathy with him. He had been immersed in his dark thoughts and had not returned her soft caress; and this troubled him a little, though he knew he could make it all right.

She came out to him at once from the morning-room, with some needlework in her hand. He took her face

between his hands and kissed it. "I've sent B another wire to say she must come to London to-morrow," he said, "and I'll meet her."

She smiled up at him, with her eyes moist. "That will be the best way, Daddy," she said. "It will be all right when you talk to one another."

He put his arm round her, and they went into the morning-room. Miss Waterhouse was there, also with needlework in her hands. "I've told the Dragon," said Caroline in a lighter tone. "You didn't tell me not to tell anybody, Dad."

He sat down by the window and lit a cigarette. "You'd better tell Barbara and Bunting too," he said. "B ought not to have engaged herself without asking me first. Anyhow, she's much too young yet. I can't allow any engagement, for at least a year. I shall bring her down here, and we'll all be happy together."

Caroline felt an immense lightening of the tension. He had spoken in his usual equable untroubled voice, announcing a decision in the way that had always made his word law in the family, though he had never before announced a decision of such importance. Responsibility was lifted from her shoulders. It had seemed to be her part to help him in uncertainty of mind, and she had felt herself inadequate to the task. But now he had made up his mind, and she had only to accept his decision. Beatrix also, though it might be harder for her. But she would accept her father's ruling. They had always obeyed him, and he had made obedience so easy. After all, he did know best.

Miss Waterhouse laid down her work on her lap. "I'm sure it will be the best thing just to say that there can be no engagement for a certain fixed time," she said. It was seldom that she offered any advice without being directly asked for it. But she said this with some earnestness, her eyes fixed upon his face.

"Yes, that will be the best way," he said, and she took up her work again.

He did not revert again to his gloomy state that evening. He and Caroline presently went out and joined Barbara and Bunting. They played golf till it was time to dress for dinner, and played bridge after dinner. He was his usual self, except that he occasionally lapsed into silence and did not respond to what was said. Beatrix's name was not mentioned.

He went up to London early the next morning, spent the greater part of the day at the Bank, and dined at one of his clubs. He played bridge afterwards until it was time to go to the station to meet the train by which Beatrix would come. So far he had successively staved off unpleasant thoughts. He had not been alone all day, for he had found acquaintances in the train going up to London. He had wanted not to be alone. He had wanted to keep up that mood of lightly poised but unquestioned authority, in which he would tell Beatrix, without putting blame on her for what she had done, that it couldn't be, and then dismiss the matter as far as possible from his mind, and leave her to get over her disappointment, which he thought she would do quickly. He was not quite pleased with her,

which prevented him from sympathising much beforehand with whatever disappointment she might feel; but his annoyance had largely subsided, and he was actually looking forward with pleasure to seeing her dear face again and getting her loving greeting.

Unfortunately the train was late, and he had to pace the platform for five and twenty minutes, during which time this lighter mood in its turn gave way to one of trouble almost as great as he had felt at first.

He had had no reply to his second telegram, although he had given instructions that if one came it was to be wired on to him at the Bank. Supposing she didn't come!

He had not yet heard from Lassigny; but if he had missed a post after Beatrix had written, his letter would not have reached Abington until the second post. But suppose Lassigny was travelling down with her!

What he had been staving off all day, instinctively, was the ugly possibility of Beatrix defying his authority. It would mean a fight between them, and he would win the fight. But it would be the upsetting of all contentment in life, as long as it lasted, and it would so alter the relations between him and the child he loved that they would probably never be the same again.

This possibility of Lassigny being with her now—of *his* undertaking her defence against her father, and of her putting herself into his hands to act for her—had not actually occurred to him before. The idea of it angered him greatly, and stiffened him against her.

There was no pleasure now in his anticipation of seeing her again.

But he melted completely when he did see her. She and her maid were alone in their compartment, and she was standing at the door looking out eagerly for him. She jumped out at once and ran to him. "My darling old Daddy!" she said, with her arm round his neck. "You're an angel to come up and meet me, and I'm so pleased to see you. I suppose we're going to Cadogan Place to-night, aren't we?"

Not a word was said between them of what they had come together for until they were sitting in the dining-room over a light supper. The maid, who was the children's old nurse, had been in the car with them. Beatrix had asked many questions about Abington, and had chattered about the moors, but had not mentioned Lassigny's name. If she had chattered even rather more than she would have done normally upon a similar meeting, it was the only sign of something else that was filling her mind. She had not been in the least nervous in manner, and her affection towards him was abundantly shown, and obviously not strained to please him. If his thoughts of her had been tinged with bitterness, she seemed to have escaped that feeling towards him.

He supposed she had not understood his hostility towards her engagement. His telegram had only summoned her. It would make his task rather more difficult. But the relief of finding her still his loving child was greater than any other consideration. If he had

taken refuge in bitter thoughts against her, he knew now how unsatisfying they were. He only wanted her love, and that had not been affected. He also wanted her happiness, and if it was to be his part to safeguard it for the future, by refusing her what she wanted in the present, it touched him now to think that his refusal must wound her. He had not allowed that consideration to affect him hitherto.

"Well, darling," he said, "you've given me a shock. These affairs aren't settled quite in that way, you know."

She looked up at him with a smile and a flush. "I was so happy," she said, "that I forgot all about that. But I came when you wanted me, Daddy."

Yes, it was going to be very difficult. But he must not allow his tenderness to take charge of him, though he could use it to soften the breaking of his decision to her.

"Why didn't he write to me?" he said.

"He did," she said. "Didn't you get his letter?"

"I haven't had it yet. If he wrote, I shall get it to-morrow, forwarded from Abington. He ought not to have asked you to engage yourself to him without asking my permission first."

"Well, you see, darling, it seemed to come about naturally. I suppose everybody was expecting it,—everybody but me, that is," she laughed gently—"and when it did come, of course everybody knew. He said he must write to you at once. He did think of coming down at once to see you, but I didn't want him to. Still, when your second telegram came, he said you'd

expect it of him; so he's coming down to-night, to see you to-morrow."

Lassigny, then, seemed to have acted with correctness. But that he should have done so did not remove any objection to him as a husband for Beatrix. It only made it rather more difficult to meet him; for Beatrix's father would not be upheld by justifiable annoyance at having been treated with disrespect.

"I'm glad he didn't come down with you," he said.

"I wanted him to," she said simply. "But he wouldn't. He said you might not like it. He *is* such a dear, Daddy. He thinks of everything. I do love him." She got up and stood over him and kissed him. "I love you too, darling," she said, "more than ever. It makes you love everybody you do love more, when this happens to you."

He couldn't face it, with his arm round her, and her soft cheek resting confidently against his. He couldn't break up her happiness and her trust there and then. Better see the fellow first. By some miracle he might show himself worthy of her. His dislike of him for the moment was in abeyance. It rested on nothing that he knew of him—only on what he had divined.

"Well," he said; "we'd better go to bed and think it all over. I'll see him to-morrow."

"He's coming here about twelve," she said, releasing herself as he stood up. "If you are in the City I can tell him to go down and see you at the Bank."

"No," he said, "I will see him here. And I don't want you to see him before I do, B. We've got to begin

it all over again, in the proper way. That's why I made you come here."

His slight change of tone caused her to look up at him. "You're not going to ask him to wait for me, are you, darling?" she asked. "We do want to get married soon. We do love each other awfully."

He kissed her. "Run along to bed," he said. "I'll tell you what I have decided when I've seen him to-morrow."

When they met at breakfast the next morning the atmosphere had hardened a little. Beatrix was not so affectionate to him in her manner as she had been; it was plain that she was not thinking of him much, except in his connection with her lover; and as the love she had shown him the night before had softened him towards the whole question, so now the absence of its signs hardened him. Of course her love for him was nothing in comparison with this new love of hers! He was a fool to have let it influence him. If he had been weak enough to let her go to bed thinking that he would make no objection to her eventual engagement, and only formalities stood in the way, it would be all the harder for her when she knew the truth.

"Have you had a letter from René?" was the first question she asked him when she had kissed him good-morning, with a perfunctory kiss that meant she was not in one of those affectionate moods which he found it so impossible to resist.

"Yes," he said shortly. "I'm going down to the Bank this morning, B. I'll see him there. I've told

William to ask him to come on to the City when he comes here."

"Can't I see him first, Dad," she asked, "when he comes here?"

"No, darling. Look here, B, I didn't want to bother you last night. I was too pleased to see you again. But I don't want you to marry Lassigny. I don't like the idea of it at all."

She looked up at him with eyes wide open. "Why not, Dad?" she ask d.

"I hate the idea of your marrying a Frenchman. I've never thought of such a thing. I wouldn't have asked him down to Abington if I had."

She looked down on her plate, and then looked up again. "You're not going to tell him we can't be married, are you?" she asked.

"I don't know what I'm going to tell him. I want to hear what he has to say first. That's only fair."

She seemed puzzled more than distressed. "I thought you liked him," she said. "I thought you only didn't like our getting engaged before he had spoken to you. You did like him at Abington, Dad; and he was a friend of Caroline's before he was a friend of mine. You didn't mind that. Why don't you want me to marry him? I love him awfully; and he loves me."

He was sorry he had said so much. He hadn't meant to say anything before his interview with Lassigny. But the idea that by a miracle Lassigny might prove himself worthy of her had faded; and her almost indifference towards him had made it not painful, as it

would have been the night before, to throw a shadow over her expectations.

"You're very young," he said. "In any case I couldn't let you marry yet."

"I was afraid you'd say that," she said quietly. "René said you wouldn't. If you let us marry at all, there would be no reason why we shouldn't be married quite soon. How long should we have to wait, Dad?"

Her submissiveness touched him again. "I don't know, darling," he said. "I can't say anything till I've seen him. Don't ask me any more questions now. Look here, you'd better go round to Hans Place this morning and stay there to lunch. Aunt Mary's in London, I know. Go round early, so as you can catch her. I shall go straight to the station from the City. Meet me for the 4.50. I'll take your tickets."

"But what about René?" she asked. "Aren't you going to let him see me, when you've talked to him?"

He was in for it now. His tone was harder than he meant it to be as he said: "In any case, B, I'm not going to let him see you for six months. I've made up my mind about that. And there's to be no engagement either. He won't expect that. You must make yourself happy at home."

"Daddy darling!" Her tone was one of pained and surprised expostulation. She seemed such a child as she looked at him out of her wide eyes that again he recoiled from hurting her.

"Six months is nothing," he said. "If you can't wait six months, B——"

He couldn't finish. It seemed mean to give her to understand that this would be his sole stipulation, when he was going to do all he could to stop her marrying Lassigny at all. But neither could he tell her that.

She was silent for a time. Then she said with a deep sigh: "I was afraid you'd say something of the sort. You're a hard old Daddy. But I made up my mind coming down in the train that I wouldn't go against you. I love René so much that I don't mind waiting for him—if it isn't too long." Another little pause, and another deep sigh. "I've been frightfully happy the last two days. But somehow I didn't think it could last—quite like that."

She saw him out of the house later on. As she put up her face to be kissed, she said: "You do love your little daughter, don't you? You won't do anything to make her unhappy."

He walked to the end of Sloane Street and took a taxi. His mind was greatly disturbed. B had behaved beautifully. She had bowed to his decision with hardly a word of protest, and he knew well enough by the look on her face when she had asked him her last question what it had cost her to do so. It was impossible to take refuge in the thought that she couldn't love this fellow much, if she resigned herself so easily to doing without him for six months. She had resigned out of love for her father, and trust in him. It was beastly to feel that he had not yet told her everything, and that her faith in him not to make her unhappy—at least in the present—was unfounded. Again he felt

himself undecided. But what could he do? How was it possible that she could judge of a man of Lassigny's type. Her love for him was pure and innocent. What was his love for her?

Well, he would find that out. The fellow should have his chance. He would not take it for granted that he had just taken a fancy—the latest of many—to a pretty face, and the charm and freshness of a very young girl; and since she happened to be of the sort that he could marry, was willing to gain possession of her in that way.

Lassigny was announced a little after twelve o'clock. His card was brought in: "Marquis de Clermont-Lassigny," in letters of print, all on a larger scale than English orthodoxy dictates. His card was vaguely distasteful to Grafton.

But when he went in to him, in the old-fashioned parlour reserved for visitors, he could not have told, if he had not known, that he was not an Englishman. His clothes were exactly 'right' in every particular. His dark moustache was clipped to the English fashion. His undoubted good looks were not markedly of the Latin type.

The two men shook hands, Lassigny with a smile, Grafton without one.

"You had my letter?" Lassigny asked.

"Yes," said Grafton, motioning him to a chair and taking one himself.

"It ought to have been written," said Lassigny, "before I spoke to Beatrix. But I trust you will under-

stand it was not from want of respect to you that it wasn't. I have come now to ask your permission—to affiance myself to your daughter."

"I wish you hadn't," said Grafton, looking at him with a half-smile. He couldn't treat this man whom he had last seen as a welcome guest in his own house as the enemy he had since felt him to be.

Lassigny made a slight gesture with shoulders and hands that was not English. "Ah," he said, "she is very young, and you don't want to lose her. She said you would feel like that. I shouldn't want to lose her myself if she were my daughter. But I hope you will give her to me, all the same. I did not concern myself with business arrangements in my letter, but my lawyers——"

"Oh, we haven't come to talking about lawyers yet," Grafton interrupted him. "Look here, Lassigny; Beatrix is hardly more than a child; you ought not to have made love to her without at least coming to me first. You wouldn't do it in your own country, you know."

He had not meant to say that, or anything like it. But it was very difficult to know what to say.

"In my own country," said Lassigny "—but you must remember that I am only half French—one makes love, and one also marries. The two things don't of necessity go together. But I have known England for a long enough time to prefer the English way."

This was exactly the opening that Grafton wanted, but had hardly expected to be given in so obvious a way.

"Exactly so!" he said, leaning forward a little, with his arm on the table by his side. "You marry and you make love, and the two things don't go together. Well, with us they do go together; and that's why I won't let my daughters marry anybody but Englishmen, if I can help it."

Lassigny looked merely surprised. "But what do you think *I* meant?" he asked. "I love Beatrix. I love her with the utmost respect. I pay her all the honour I can in asking her to be my wife."

"And how many women have you loved before?" asked Grafton. "And how many are you going to love afterwards?"

Lassigny recoiled, with a dark flush on his face. "But do you want to insult me?" he asked.

"Look here, Lassigny," said Grafton again. "We belong to two different nations. I'm not going to pick my words, or disguise my meaning, out of compliment to you. It's far too serious. You must take me as an Englishman. You know enough about us to be able to do it."

"Well!" said Lassigny, grudgingly, after a pause. "You asked me a question. You asked me two questions. I think they are not the questions that one gentleman ought to ask of another. It should be enough that I pay honour to the one I love. My name is old, and has dignity. I have——"

"Oh, we needn't go into that," Grafton interrupted him. "We treat as equals there, with the advantage on your side, if it's anywhere."

"But, pardon me; we must go into it. It is essential. What more can I do than to offer my honourable name to your daughter? It means much to me. If I honour it, as I do, I honour her."

"I know you honour her, in your way. It isn't our way. I'll ask you another question of the sort you say one gentleman ought not to ask of another. Should you consider it dishonouring your name, or dishonouring the woman you've given it to, to make love to somebody else, after you've been married a year or two, if the fancy takes you?"

Lassigny rose to his feet. "Mr. Grafton," he said, "I don't understand you. I think it is you who are dishonouring your own daughter, whom I love, and shall always love."

Grafton, without rising, held up a finger at him. "How am I dishonouring her?" he asked with insistence. "Tell me why you say I'm dishonouring her."

Lassigny looked down at him. "To me," he said slowly, "she is the most beautiful and the sweetest girl on the earth. Don't you think so too? I thought you did."

Grafton rose. "You've said it; it's her beauty," he said more quickly. "If she loses that,—as she will lose it with her youth,—she loses you. I'm not going to let her in for that kind of disillusionment."

Lassigny was very stiff now, and entirely un-English in manner, and even in appearance. "Pardon me, Mr. Grafton, for having misunderstood your point of view. If it is a Puritan you want for your daughter

I fear I am out of the running. I withdraw my application to you for her hand."

"That's another thing," said Grafton, as Lassigny turned to leave him. "I wouldn't let a daughter of mine marry a Catholic."

Lassigny went out, without another word.

CHAPTER XV

BEATRIX COMES HOME

Beatrix and her maid were already at the station when Grafton arrived. He had only allowed himself ten minutes, and was busy getting tickets, finding a carriage and buying papers, until it was nearly time for the train to start. Then he found somebody to talk to, and only joined Beatrix at the last moment.

She had given him rather a pathetic look of enquiry when he had first come up to them waiting for him in the booking-office. Now she sat in her corner of the carriage, very quiet. They were alone together.

He sat down opposite to her, and took her hand in his. "My darling," he said, "he isn't the right man for you. You must forget him."

She left her hand lying in his, inertly. Her eyes were wide and her face pale as she asked: "Have you told him he can't marry me at all?"

He changed his seat to one beside her. "B darling," he said, "you know I wouldn't hurt you if I could help it. I hated the idea of it so much last night that I couldn't tell you, as perhaps I ought to have done, that I didn't think you'd see him again. I wasn't quite sure. He might have been different from what I thought him. But he isn't the husband for a girl like you, darling. He made that quite plain."

Her hands lay in her lap, and she was looking out of the window. "Did you send him away?" she asked, turning her head towards him. "Isn't he going to see me again—or write to me?"

"He won't see you again. I didn't tell him he wasn't to write to you, but I don't think he will; I hope he won't. It's no good, darling. The break has come; it must make you very unhappy for a time, I know that, my dear little girl. But I hope it won't be for long. We all love you dearly at home, you know. We shall make it up to you in time."

He felt, as he said this, how entirely devoid of comfort such words must be to her. The love of those nearest to her, which had been all-sufficing, would count as nothing in the balance against the new love that she wanted. She had told him the night before that the new love heightened and increased the old; and so it would, as long as he, who had hitherto come first with her, stepped willingly down from that eminence, and added his tribute to hers. Opposition instead of tribute would wipe out, for the time at least, all that she had felt for him during all the years of her life. The current of all her love was pouring into the new channel that had been opened up. There would be none to water the old channels, unless they led into the new one.

She turned to him again. There was a look in her face that he had never seen there before, and it struck through to his heart. It was the dawning of hostility, which put her apart from him as nothing else could have done; for it meant that there were tracts in her

as yet unexplored, and perhaps unsuspected, and there was no knowing what arid spaces he would have to traverse in them. "I can't understand it at all," she said quietly. "Why did you send him away, and why did he go? I *know* he loves me; and he knows I love him, and forgive him anything that was wrong. What *is* wrong? You ought to tell me that."

He stirred uneasily in his seat. How could he tell her what was wrong? She was so innocent of evil. If he felt, as he did, that Lassigny's desire for her touched her with it, he had diverted that from her. He couldn't plunge her into it again by explanations that would only justify himself.

"Darling child," he said. "It's all wrong. You must trust me to know. I've made no mistake. If he had been what the man who marries you must be he wouldn't have gone away from me as he did, in offence. He'd have justified himself, or tried to. And I'd have listened to him too. As it was, I don't think we were together for ten minutes. He gave you up, B. He was offended, and he gave you up—before I had asked him to. Yes, certainly before I had said anything final."

She looked out of the window again. "I wish I knew what had happened," she said as quietly as before. "I can't understand his giving me up—of his own free will. I wish I knew what you had said to him."

This hardened him a little. He did not want to make too much of Lassigny's having so easily given up his claims. He was not yet sure that he had entirely given them up. But, at any rate, the offence to his pride had

been enough to have caused him to do so unconditionally for the time being. Beatrix had been given up for it without a struggle to retain her, and it was not Beatrix's father who had made any conditions as to his seeing her or writing to her again, or had needed to do so. Yet she would not accept it, that the renunciation could have been on the part of the man whom she hardly knew. It must have been some injustice or harshness on his part, from whom she had had nothing but love all her life.

"It doesn't matter what I said to him, or what he said to me," he answered her. "If he had been the right sort of man for you nothing that I said to him would have caused him offence. He took offence, and withdrew. You must accept that, B darling. I didn't, actually, send him away. I shouldn't have sent him away, if he had justified himself to me in any degree. You know how much I love you, don't you? Surely you can trust me a little?"

He put his hand out to take hers, in a way that she had never yet failed to respond to. But she did not take it. It wasn't, apparently, of the least interest to her to be told how much he loved her. There was no comfort at all in that, to her who had so often shown herself hungry for the caresses that showed his love.

She sat still, looking out of the window, and saying nothing for a long time. He said nothing either, but took up one of the papers he had bought. He made himself read it with attention, and succeeded in taking in what he read after a few attempts. His heart was

heavy enough; there would be a great deal more to go through yet before there could be any return to the old conditions of affection and contentment between him and this dear hurt child of his. But all had been said that could profitably be said. It would be much better to put it aside now, and act as if it were not there, as far as it was possible, and encourage her to do so.

She was strangely quiet, sitting there half-turned away from him with her eyes always fixed upon the summer landscape now flowing steadily past them; and yet she was, by temperament, more emotional than any of his children. None of them had ever cried much—they had had very little in their lives to cry about—but Beatrix had been more easily moved to tears than the others. She might have been expected to cry over what she was feeling now. Perhaps she wouldn't begin to get over the blow that had been dealt her until she did cry.

He felt an immense pity and tenderness for her, sitting there as still as a mouse. He would have liked to put his arm around her and draw her to him, and soothe her trouble, which she should have sobbed out on his shoulder as she had done with the little troubles of her childhood. But that unknown quantity in her restrained him. He knew instinctively that she would reject him as the consoler of this trouble. He was the cause of it in her poor wounded groping little mind.

Presently she roused herself and took up an illustrated paper, which she glanced through, saying as she did so, in a colourless voice: "Shall we be able to get some tea at Ganton? I've got rather a headache."

"Have you, my darling?" he said tenderly. "Yes, we shall have five minutes there. Haven't you any phenacetin in your bag?"

"Yes; but it isn't as bad as that," she said. "I'll take some when I get home, if it's worse."

"Give me a kiss, my little B," he said. "You do love your old Daddy, don't you?"

She kissed him obediently. "Yes, of course," she said, and returned to her paper.

They spoke little after that until they reached the station for Abington. If he said anything she replied to it, and sometimes she made a remark herself. But there was never anything like conversation between them. He was in deep trouble about her all the time, and could never afterwards look out on certain landmarks of that journey without inwardly flinching. He would not try to comfort her again. He knew that was beyond his power. She must get used to it first; and nobody could help her. And he would not bother her by talking; just a few words now and then were as necessary to her as to him.

Only Caroline had come to meet them. Beatrix clung to her a little as she kissed her, but that was all the sign she made, and she exerted herself a little more than she had done to talk naturally, until they reached home.

Barbara and Bunting were in front of the house as they came up. After a sharp glance at her and their father, they greeted her with the usual affection that this family habitually showed to one another, and both

said that they were glad to see her home again, as if they meant it. Miss Waterhouse was behind them, and said: "You look pale, B darling. Hadn't you better go straight to your room and lie down?"

She went upstairs with her. Barbara and Bunting, with a glance at one another, took themselves off. Caroline followed her father into the library.

"It's all over," he said shortly. "I saw him this morning. He's what I thought he was. She's well rid of him, poor child. But, of course, she's taking it very hard. You must look after her, darling. I can't do anything for her yet. She's closed up against me."

"Poor old Daddy," said Caroline, feeling in her sensitive fibre the hurt in him. "Was it very difficult for you?"

"It wasn't difficult to get rid of him," he said. "I didn't have to. He retired of his own accord. Whether he'll think better of his offence and try to come back again I don't know. But my mind's quite made up about him. However she feels about it I'm not going to give her to a man like that. She'll thank me for it by and by. Or if she doesn't I can't help it. I'm not going through this for my own sake."

She asked him a few questions as to how Beatrix had carried herself, and then she went up to her.

Beatrix was undressing, and crying softly. She had sent Miss Waterhouse away, saying that she was coming down to dinner, and it was time to dress. But when she had left her she had broken down, and decided to go to bed.

She threw herself into Caroline's arms, and cried as if her heart would break. Caroline said nothing until the storm had subsided a little, which it did very soon. "I can't help crying—just once," she said. "But I'm not going to let myself be like that. Why does he make me so unhappy? I thought he loved me."

Caroline thought she meant Lassigny. All that she had been told was that he had given her up. Fortunately she did not answer before Beatrix said: "He won't tell me what's wrong, and what he said to him, to make him go away. Oh, it's very cruel. I do love him, and I shall never love anybody else. And we were so happy together. And now he comes in and spoils it all. I shall never see him again; he said so."

Caroline had no difficulty now in disengaging the personalities of the various 'he's' and 'him's.'

"Daddy's awfully sad about it, B," she said. "You know he couldn't be cruel to any of us."

"He's been cruel to me," said Beatrix. "I came down when he told me to, although I didn't want to, and I made up my mind that if he wanted us to put it off, even for as long as a year, I would ask René to, because I did love him and wanted to please him. And he was all right about it last night—and yet all the time he meant to do this. I call that cruel. And what has my poor René done? He won't tell me. Has he told you?"

"I don't think it's anything that he's done," said Caroline slowly. "He says he isn't——"

"Oh, I know," said Beatrix, breaking in on her.

"He isn't a fit husband for me. He told *me* that. How does he know? He says he only talked to him for ten minutes, and then he said something that made him go away. Oh, why did he go away like that? He does love me, I know. Isn't he ever going to try to see me again, or even to write to me, to say good-bye?"

Caroline's heart was torn, but she couldn't merely soothe and sympathise with her. "It's frightfully hard for you, darling, I know," she said. "But he wouldn't just have gone away and given you up—M. de Lassigny, I mean—if Daddy hadn't been right about him."

"Oh, of course, you take his side!" said Beatrix. "I trusted him too, and he's been cruel to me."

Caroline helped her to bed. Her heart was heavy, both for Beatrix and for her father. She tried no more to defend him. It was of no use at present. Beatrix must work that out for herself. At present she was more in need of consolation than he was, and she tried her best to give it to her. But that was of little use either. Her grievance against her father was now rising to resentment. As she poured out her trouble, which after all did give her some relief, although she was unaware of it, Caroline could only say, "Oh, no, B darling, you mustn't say that"; or, "You know how much he loves you; he must be right about it." But in the end she was a little shaken in her own faith. She thought that Beatrix ought to have known more. She would have wanted to know more herself, if she had been in her place.

Later on in the evening she and Miss Waterhouse sat

with him in the library, to which he had taken himself instinctively after dinner, as the room of the master of the house. Caroline had told him, what there was no use in keeping back, that Beatrix thought he had been unjust to her, and he was very unhappy.

He talked up and down about it for some time, and then said, with a reversion to the direct speech that was more characteristic of him: "She's bound to think I've been unjust to her, I suppose. Do you think so too?"

Miss Waterhouse did not reply. Caroline said, after a short pause: "I think if I were B I should want to know why you thought he wasn't fit for me. If it's anything that he's done——"

"It's the way he and men like him look upon marriage," he said. "I can't go into details—I really can't, either to you or her."

"But if he loves her very much—mightn't it be all right with them?"

"Yes, it might," he answered without any hesitation. "If he loved her in the right way."

"Are you quite sure he doesn't, darling? If he had a chance of proving it!"

"He hasn't asked for the chance."

"It really comes back to that," said Miss Waterhouse, speaking almost for the first time. "You would not have refused him his chance, if he had asked for it?"

"I don't know. I don't think I should. If he had said that his loving Beatrix made things different to him—if he'd shown in any way that they were different

to him—I don't know what I should have done. It certainly wouldn't have ended as it did."

"Well, Cara dear," said Miss Waterhouse, "I think the thing to say is that M. de Lassigny was not prepared to satisfy your father that he even wanted to be what he thought B's husband ought to be. If he had gone ever such a little way he would have had his chance."

"It is he who has given her up. I know that," said Caroline. "You didn't really send him away at all, did you? Oh, I'm sure you must have been right about him. I liked him, you know; but—He can't love B very much, I should think, if he was willing to give her up like that, at once."

That was the question upon which the unhappy clash of interests turned during the days that followed. Beatrix knew that he loved her. How could she make a mistake about that? She turned a little from Caroline, who was very loving to her but would not put herself unreservedly on her side, and poured out all her griefs to Barbara, and also to Mollie Walter. Barbara, not feeling herself capable of pronouncing upon anything on her own initiative, took frequent counsel of Miss Waterhouse, who advised her to be as sweet to B as possible, but not to admit that their father could have been wrong in the way he had acted. "There is no need to say that M. de Lassigny was," she said. "Poor B will see that for herself in time."

Poor B was quite incapable of seeing anything of the sort at present. She was also deeply offended at

any expression of the supposition that she would 'get over it'—as if it were an attack of measles. She told Mollie, who gave her actually more of the sympathy that she wanted than any of her own family, that she couldn't understand her father taking this light view of love. She would have thought he understood such things better. She would never love anybody but René, even if they did succeed in keeping them apart all their lives. And she knew he would love her in the same way."

There was, however, no getting over the fact that René, when he had walked out of the Bank parlour, in offence, had walked out of his matrimonial intentions at the same time. The fashionable intelligence department announced his intention of spending the autumn at his Château in Picardy, and there was some reason to suppose that the announcement, not usual in the way it was given, might be taken as indicating to those who had thought of him as taking an English bride that his intentions in that respect had been relinquished.

Grafton was rather surprised at having got rid of him so easily, and inclined to question himself as to the way in which he had done it. He told Worthing of all that had passed, and Worthing's uncomplicated opinion was that the fellow must have been an out and out wrong 'un.

"I don't say that," Grafton said. "He was in love with B in the way that a fellow of that sort falls in love. Probably she'd have been very happy with him for a time. But she wouldn't have known how to hold

him—wouldn't have known that she had to, poor child. I'm precious glad she's preserved from it. You know, Worthing, I couldn't have stopped it if he'd said—like an English fellow might have done—a fellow who had gone the pace—that all that was over for good; he wanted to make himself fit for a girl like B—something of that sort. Many a fellow has been made by loving a good innocent girl, and marrying. B could have done that for him, if he'd been the right sort—and wanted it."

"I bet she could," said Worthing loyally. "It's hard luck she should have set her heart on a wrong 'un. They can't tell the difference, I suppose—girls, I mean. I don't know much about 'em, but I've learnt a good deal since I've got to know yours. It makes you feel different about all that sort of game. It's made me wish sometimes that I'd married myself, before I got too old for it. What I can't quite understand is its not affecting this fellow in the same sort of way. I don't understand his not making a struggle for her."

"Well, I suppose it's as he said to me—what annoyed me so—that marriage is a thing apart with him and his like. He's got plenty to offer in marriage, and it would probably annoy him much more than it would an Englishman in the same sort of position as his, to be turned down. He may have been sorry that he'd cut it off himself so decisively, but his pride wouldn't let him do anything to recover his ground. That's what I think has happened."

"Well, but what about his being in love with her?

That'd count a good deal with a girl like her, I should say—Frenchman or no Frenchman."

"He's been in love plenty of times before. He knows how easy it is to get over, if she doesn't—the sort of love *he's* likely to have felt for her. It might have turned into something more, if he'd known her longer. Perhaps he didn't know that; they don't know everything about love—the sensualists—though they think they do. She hadn't had time to make much impression on him—just a very pretty bright child; I think he'd have got tired of her in no time, sweet as she is. Oh, I'm thankful we've got rid of him. I've never done a better thing in my life than when I stopped it. But I'm not having a happy time about it at present, Worthing. No more is my little B."

CHAPTER XVI

CLOUDS

The fact that Lassigny's proposal to Beatrix and her acceptance of it had taken place in a houseful of people made it impossible to keep the affair a family secret. Reminders of its being known soon began to disturb the quietude of Abington Abbey.

Grafton went up to the Bank a few days after he had brought Beatrix down, and his sister-in-law called upon him there and asked to be taken out to luncheon. She had come up from the country on purpose and wanted to hear all about it.

Grafton was seriously annoyed. "My dear Mary," he said politely, "it can only be a pleasure to take you out to lunch at any time, and in half an hour I shall be ready to take you to the Berkeley, or wherever you'd like to go to. Will you make yourself comfortable with the paper in the meantime?"

"Oh, I know you're furious with me for having come here, George," she said, "and it's quite true I've never done it before. But I *must* talk to you, and when James said you were coming up to-day I knew it was the only way of getting you. You'd have put me off politely—you're always polite—if I'd telephoned. So please forgive me, and go back to your work till you're ready.

I'll write a letter or two. I shall love to do it on the Bank paper."

He came back for her in less than the half-hour. She had her car waiting, and directly they had settled themselves in it he said: "Now look here, Mary, I'm glad you've come, after all. I'll tell you exactly what has happened and you can tell other people. There's no mystery and there's nothing to hide. Lassigny asked B to marry him in the way you've heard of. When he came here to talk it over with me I put one or two questions to him which offended him, and he withdrew. That's all there is to it."

"I don't think it's quite enough, George," she replied at once. "People are talking. I've had one or two letters already. It's hard on poor little B too. She doesn't understand it, and it's making her very miserable."

"Has she written to you about it?"

"Of course she has. You sent her to me while you were getting rid of her lover for her, and she had to write and tell me what had happened. It isn't like you to play the tyrant to your children, George; but really you do seem to have done it here. She won't forgive you, you know."

That was Lady Grafton's attitude at the beginning of the hour or so they spent together, and it was her attitude at the end of it. He had gone further in self-defence than he had had any intention of going, but all she had said was: "Well, I know you think you're right, but honestly I don't, George. Constance

Ardrishaig wrote to me about it and said that they were perfectly delightful together. He thought the world of her, and everybody knows that when a man does fall in love with a thoroughly nice girl it alters him—if he's been what he ought to have been."

Travelling down in the train Grafton found himself embarked upon that disturbing exercise of going over a discussion again and mending one's own side of it. Mary ought to have been able to see it. She had used some absurd arguments; if he had answered her in this way or that, she would have been silenced. Or better still, if he had refused to discuss the matter at all, and rested himself upon the final fact that it was Lassigny who had withdrawn; and there was an end of it. She had, actually, seemed to realise that there was an end of it. She didn't suggest that anything should be done. He rather gathered that Lady Ardrishaig had some intention of writing to Lassigny and trying to 'bring it on again.' Mary had seemed to hint at that, but had denied any such idea when he had asked her if it was so. She had been cleverer at holding him aloof than he had been in holding her. If there was anything that could be done, by these kind ladies who knew so much better what was for his daughter's welfare than he did, it would be done behind his back.

Beatrix met him at the station. When they were in the car together she snuggled up to him and said: "Did you see Aunt Mary, darling?"

It was the first time she had used an endearing expression to him since he had brought her home. He

had experienced a great lift of spirit when he had seen her waiting for him on the platform, looking once again like her old self, and she had kissed him and taken his arm as they went out to the car. But now his heart sank like lead. "Yes, I saw her," he said shortly.

That was all. Beatrix gradually withdrew herself from her warm contact with him, and spoke of surface matters in the lifeless voice she now habitually used towards him. It was plain to him that Lady Grafton had given her to understand that she was going to do something to help her. He had not understood that there had been a correspondence between them.

He complained of it to Caroline. "I suppose she wrote and asked Aunt Mary to see me," he said. "I don't like it at all. Hasn't she got any love for me left? She was just like she always has been for a few minutes, while she thought something might have happened. But it wasn't really for me. It's all that fellow,—and he doesn't want her any more."

Caroline spoke to Beatrix. "You're making Dad awfully unhappy," she said.

"Well, he's making me awfully unhappy," said Beatrix, without waiting for anything further. "He wants me to love him, and of course I do. But I simply can't make a fuss of him, when he's behaving so unfairly. Everybody sympathises with me, except him. And nobody can see any reason for his sending René away, as he did."

It was true that most people who knew about it did

sympathise with Beatrix. She received letters, and wrote letters. For the first time in the history of the Grafton family letters that arrived were not common property. No one asked Beatrix whom hers were from, if they came at breakfast-time, nor did she volunteer the information, though sometimes she showed them to Caroline afterwards.

The neighbours knew the story. It annoyed Grafton when he first realised that it was a matter of common talk. The information came to him from Lady Mansergh, of all people in the world.

Lady Mansergh was of an earlier generation of stage beauties than those who now so admirably play their titled parts. She was obviously and frankly 'common.' No one who knew her could have thrown doubt upon the genuine gold of her heart, whatever they may have thought of that of her head, but it had needed all of it to reconcile Grafton to seeing his girls made much of by the stout affectionate lady, who had taken them all to her ample bosom from the first. He had, as a matter of fact, been nearer to the Vicar's opinion, that Lady Mansergh was not a person for them to become intimate with, than to Worthing's, that she was 'perfectly all right, and couldn't possibly do them any harm.' He had even talked to Miss Waterhouse about it, but somewhat to his surprise she had not advised any standing off in whatever relationship the proximity of the two houses might bring about. "Whatever is odd about her they laugh at," she said. "It makes no more impression on them than that. She is a good-

hearted woman, and it is their innocence and brightness that she loves in them. She would never do or say anything that could offend them.

So Lady Mansergh drove over occasionally to the Abbey to see her pretty bunch of girls, as she called them, and shook her fat sides with merriment at the entertainment they afforded her. She had a married step-daughter staying with her at this time, with a family of little children, and the Grafton girls, especially Barbara, were baby worshippers. So that took them to Wilborough. And there were the links in the park, which Sir Alexander had handed over to an informal club, with Worthing as its secretary. Grafton played on them frequently himself, and whenever there was anybody there from the Abbey Lady Mansergh was pretty sure to put in an appearance at some point or other of the course, with a pressing invitation to lunch or tea. If it were not accepted she would keep them company for a time, waddling along with her dachshund and her pug, in a state of high good humour, and talking most of the time, both at those stages of the game that admitted of conversation and those that didn't.

Grafton's objections to her as an intimate of his children to this friendly open extent had died down. There are some people who can be taken purely on the basis of the heart, whatever other factors go to their composition, and Lady Mansergh was one of them. But, friendly as he felt towards her, he was by no means prepared to admit her into confidence on such a matter as this of Beatrix's. A question of marriage, or of

love—Lady Mansergh's experiences on either might include many points of interest; but the tacit understanding surely was that such experiences on her part should be kept in the background. She was what she was now, in this intimacy with his family, and nothing of what she had been.

She got hold of him one afternoon after he had finished his round, and was strolling up with the rest through the garden on their way to tea on the terrace. Tea was not quite ready, and she took him off to her rock-garden, with which his was now in hot competition. Caroline had been coming with them, but Lady Mansergh sent her back. "I've got something to say to your father, dear," she said. "You go and talk to somebody else. You shall come along with me and look at the sempervivums after tea if you want to."

She lost no time in coming to the point. "Now, Mr. Grafton," she said, "I like you and you like me; there's no offence between friends. Can't you do something for that poor dear little girl of yours? She's crying her eyes out for the man she loves. *I* can see it if *you* can't. A father's a father, but he hadn't ought to act harsh to his children. You'll have her going into a decline if you don't do something."

Grafton stood still and faced her. "I didn't know it was that you wanted to talk to me about," he said. "Really, Lady Mansergh, I can't discuss it with you. Let's go back to the others."

She laid her fat hand on his sleeve. "Now don't cut up offended, there's a dear man," she said in a

pleading soothing voice. "I do so love those girls of yours, that it isn't like interfering. Just let me talk to you a bit about it. No harm'll be done if you can't see it as I do when we've had our little chat."

He walked on again with her. "There's nothing to talk about," he said. "I don't know what you know or from whom you know it, but the facts are that the man asked for my permission to marry Beatrix and then withdrew his request. He has now left England and—well, there's an end of it. He is going, evidently, to forget all about her, and she must learn to forget him. She'll do it quickly enough if her kind friends will leave her alone, and not encourage her to think she's been hardly used. She hasn't been hardly used by me, and to be perfectly straight with you I don't like being told that I'm dealing harshly with my children. It isn't true, and couldn't be true, loving all of them as I do."

"Oh, I know you're a *perfect* father to them," said Lady Mansergh enthusiastically. "And they simply adore you—every one of them. I'm sure it does anybody good to see you together. But what *I* think, you know, Mr. Grafton, is that when fathers love their daughters as you love those sweet girls of yours, and depend a lot on them, as, of course, you do, with your wife gone, poor man!—well, you don't *like* 'em falling in love. It means somebody else being put first like, when you've always been first yourself. But lor', Mr. Grafton, they won't love you any the less when they take husbands. You'll always be second if you can't

be first; and first you can't always be, with human nature what it is, and husbands counting for more than fathers."

"I think that's perfectly true," said Grafton, in an easy voice. "A father can't hope to be first when his daughters marry, but he'll generally remain second. Well, when my daughters do marry I shall be content to take that position, and I shall always remember you warned me that I should have to. Thank you very much."

"Ah, now you're laughing at me," she said, looking up in his face, "but you're angry all the same. You ought not to be angry. I'm telling you the woman's side. When a woman loves a man she loves him whatever he is, and if he hasn't been quite what he ought, if she's a good woman she can make him different. That's what she thinks, and she's right to think it. The chance of trying ought not to be took from her."

"Perhaps not," said Grafton. "But in this case it has been taken from her by the man himself. It comes down to that first and last, Lady Mansergh. It's very kind of you to interest yourself in the matter, but really there's nothing to be done, except to encourage Beatrix to forget all about it. If you'll take your part in doing that, you'll be doing her a good turn, and me too."

"There is something to be done, and you could do it," she said. "That's to write and tell the Marquis that you spoke hurriedly. However, I know you won't do it, so I shan't press you any more."

"No, I don't propose to do that," he said. "And now I think we'll talk about something else."

It was difficult to be angry with the stout kind-hearted lady herself, but Grafton was angry over the episode—more angry than he had been over any other. He and Caroline had come over in the little car that he drove himself, and he talked to her about it going back. "It's really intolerable that a woman like that should be mixed up in it," he said. "She's a good-hearted old thing, but she hasn't exactly the sort of history that makes her a person to consult in an affair like this. If B has so far forgotten herself as to make a confidant of Lady Mansergh it's time I talked to her about it. I've just let it alone so far, and hoped she'd recover herself by degrees. But she seems to be making her grievance public property, and she must leave off doing that."

"I don't think she *can* have said anything to Lady Mansergh," said Caroline, rather doubtful about it, all the same. "I think Geoffrey Mansergh must have told her. He knows a lot of people that we do."

"Oh, she talked about B crying her eyes out for him. She must have tried to get sympathy from her. Besides, she does talk about it to other people. There's that little Mollie Walter. And the Pemberton girls. They look at me as if I were a sort of ogre. And the Beckley girl too. Really, I'm not going to be put in that position. It's time B was brought to her senses. If she's going to change the whole of her attitude towards me because of this, I suppose I've got to put up

with it. But I'm not going to be held up here as a brutal tyrannical father, and have the whole of our jolly family life spoilt, as she's spoiling it now."

In this mood he talked to Beatrix immediately he reached home, summoning her into the library in order to do so. He had never lectured one of his children before. None of them had ever needed it. In the old days of occasional childish naughtiness, when as a last resort his authority had been called in, his way had been to take them on his knee and express surprise and sorrow at what he had been told about them. Floods of tears, embraces and promises of complete and fundamental change of conduct had immediately followed, and carried off the remains of whatever naughtiness had been complained of. To hold out against Miss Waterhouse had sometimes been necessary to satisfy that spirit of contrariety which represents the workings of original sin in the best behaved of children. But to hold out against him had never been possible. The melting had come immediately, and subsequent behaviour had always been beautiful until the devil pricked again.

Perhaps if he had acted in some sort of way as would have represented this parental regret, Beatrix might have succumbed to it, as she had always done in the past. But he had shown her so plainly that his love was there ready for her, and that he wanted hers in return, and she had held aloof from him. He was hard with her, and she was hard in return, with a hardness he had never suspected in her. His displeasure

seemed not to disturb her at all; she rejected its grounds, and expressed her displeasure with him in return, not with any lack of filial respect, but still as if they were two people on equal terms who had fallen out and could not come together again unless one or the other of them gave way. That he was her father did not appear to her to be reason why she should be the one to give way. She was very sorry, but she couldn't see that she had done anything wrong. She had not, as a matter of fact, said anything to Lady Mansergh, who had heard what had happened from outside. She had been very kind about it, and so had other people who knew. Mollie Walter was her chief friend, and she had told her everything; she didn't see how she could be blamed for that. If she had only told her one side, it was because she couldn't see that there *was* more than one side. She had never said a word about it to the Pembertons, nor they to her. But they had been more than usually kind to her since, and she supposed it was because they sympathised with her. She didn't see how she could be blamed for that either.

"Well, darling," said Grafton, "perhaps I did you an injustice in thinking that you had talked about it all too much. If so, I'm sorry. But look here, B, we can't go on like this, you know. It's spoiling our family life, and our happiness together. You've had nearly three weeks now to get over it in. When are you going to begin to be what you've always been again?"

"How can you expect me to be the same?" she asked. "I was very happy, and now I'm very unhappy."

"But you're not going to be unhappy all your life, you know. You were as happy here a month ago as all the rest of us. If you can't take so much pleasure in it all just at present you might at least stop spoiling it for us."

"How am I spoiling it for you?"

"Well, I think you know that. We've always been together, and since we've lived here we've all been together in almost everything we've done. Now we're not. You put yourself out of it. It affects us all, and, of course, it affects me more than anybody, because I can't take pleasure in anything that one of my children holds herself apart from, as you're doing. It's more than that. You're almost at enmity with me."

"No, I'm not. But how can I forget what you've done? You've spoilt my life for me. If you hadn't sent him away, I'd have loved you more than ever. Of course I do love you; but I can't help its making a difference."

"My dear child, I've not spoilt your life for you at all. What I've done is to prevent somebody else spoiling it; or, at any rate, I've removed the risk of that happening."

"There wasn't any risk of that happening. I know what he's like, and I know how he loves me. And I love him more than ever now. I always shall love him, whatever happens. You can't make me alter there."

"You're talking very foolishly, B. You're eighteen years old, and you've fallen in love for the first time in life with a man who at the best wouldn't be a particularly suitable life companion for you. Whatever you may feel about it now, you're not going to spend the rest of your days in mourning for him. In six months' time you'll be wondering how you can have felt about him as you do now. I can assure you of that."

She sat looking down upon her hands lying on her lap, with an expression that meant she was not going to answer a statement so absurd as that. Her look of obstinacy stiffened him still further against her, and he proceeded to develop his thesis, not realising that by so doing he was bound to produce just the opposite effect from what he wished.

"Love of this sort is like an illness," he said. "You get over it in that form even if it leads to marriage. If it's the right sort of marriage the love turns into something else that lasts, and no doubt it's the right way to begin. If it doesn't lead to marriage, well, you simply get over it. It's time you began to try."

Still no answer. If he *would* talk in this way, so incredibly misunderstanding the most beautiful and wonderful thing in the world, it was her duty to listen to him as long as he went on.

He didn't go on any more. He was irritated by her silence. "Oh, well," he said, rising from his chair, "there's no use in saying any more. If you're determined to be love-sick, you must be so, as long as you can keep it up. I should have thought, though, that

you'd have had more pride than to show yourself pining for a man who, after all, has given you up. I've nothing more to say about it."

When she had left him, as she did immediately, as one released from an unpleasant and undesired interview, he greatly reproached himself for the unkindness of his last speech. It had been dictated partly by that inexplicable perversity which impels to the hurting of those who are loved, but such an impulsion was not likely to be strong in one of Grafton's equable kindly nature. It was beastly to have talked to the poor child in that way. She was suffering, and she couldn't know that her suffering was capable of quick cure. He ought to have been tender of her inexperience, and spared her illusions until time should have shown her what they were. Besides, he wanted her love; it was beginning to distress him greatly that she had so much withdrawn it from him. In his reaction from a mood of hard irritation to one of tenderness his attitude towards the whole question relaxed, and he asked himself again whether he had been entirely right in what he had done.

What had he done? His dislike of Lassigny as a husband for Beatrix had been merely instinctive. If Lassigny had pressed his suit, even without satisfying him that he was not what he seemed to him to be, he could scarcely have held out. There would have been no grounds for his rejection of him that his world could have seen; and he was influenced by the opinion of his world, and, if it had been a question of any one

but his own daughter, would most likely have shared it. Even now, in his greatly softened moods towards her, he would almost have welcomed a state of things in which she would not quite be cut off from hope. Perhaps it would have turned out all right. She was sweet enough to keep any man devoted to her. Her own love was pure enough, even if it was at the stage at which it hardly represented more than physical attraction; and she had a right to her own desires; he could not exercise his parental veto in the last resort on any but very definite grounds, such as could hardly be said to exist here. If only he could have given her what she wanted, and made her happy again, and loving towards himself, it would have lifted a great and increasing trouble from him! The present state of feeling between him and his dearly loved child seemed as if it might part them permanently. He could not look forward to that without a desperate sinking of heart.

But what could he do? It did, after all, come down, as he had said, to the fact that he had not actually sent Lassigny away. Lassigny had withdrawn his suit. That was the leading factor in the situation.

He went to find Beatrix. He wanted to put this to her, once more, with all the affection that he felt towards her, and to reason with her still further, but not in the same spirit as just now. And he wanted still more to make it up with her. She was beginning to wear him down. She could do without him, but he couldn't do without her.

But Beatrix had gone out, to talk to Mollie Walter,

and when she came in again, at tea-time, and brought Mollie with her, she kissed him, and was rather brighter than she had been. There was a great lift in his spirits, and although she did not respond to any appreciable extent to his further affectionate approaches and the gleam of sunshine faded again, he thought he had better let her alone. Perhaps she was beginning to get over it, and the clouds would break again, and finally roll away altogether.

CHAPTER XVII

BUNTING TAKES ADVICE

Jimmy Beckley had come over to spend the day at Abington. He had brought his sister Vera with him, not altogether without protest. The Grafton girls, he had explained to her, were always jolly pleased to see him, and he got on well with all of them; in fact they were topping girls, and he didn't yet know which of the three he liked best. If he went over alone he could take his pick, but if she went over with him, one, or perhaps two of them, would have to do the polite to her. He betted that they'd rather have him without her. Vera, however, had said that he was a conceited little monkey, and she was coming. So he had made the best of it, and being of less adamantine stuff than he liked to represent himself, he had driven her over in a pony cart, instead of riding, as he would have done if he had gone alone.

Grafton was in London for the day. Caroline and Vera wanted to talk together, and the other four played lawn tennis. But after a couple of sets Beatrix said it was too hot to play any more and went indoors. Jimmy looked after her with regret. For the moment he judged her to be the most attractive of all the Grafton girls, and had invented some amusing things

to say to her. It seemed a pity to waste them on Barbara. He liked her, and she and he and Bunting had had a good deal of fun together at one time or another. But it had been boy's fun, in which she had naturally taken a subordinate part, as became one of her sex. She was hardly old enough to awaken a more tender emotion in his breast. He was beginning to feel that towards Caroline and Beatrix both, but was not yet sure which of them he should choose when he came to man's estate. Beatrix was the prettier of the two, but they were both very pretty, and Caroline responded rather more to his advances.

Barbara suggested a tournament between the three of them, but the boys didn't care about that, nor for a three-handed set. Eventually, after a short rest, and some agreeable conversation, Barbara found herself shelved, she did not quite know how, and Jimmy and Bunting went off to the gooseberry bushes; not without advice from Barbara not to make little pigs of themselves.

"It's a rummy thing," said Jimmy, "that girls of Barbara's age never quite know how to behave themselves. They think it's funny to be merely rude. Now neither of us would make a mistake of that sort. I suppose it's because they haven't knocked about as much as we have. They don't get their corners rubbed off."

"Oh, Barbara's all right," said Bunting, who respected Jimmy's opinions but did not like to hear his sisters criticised. "We say things like that to each

other. She didn't mean anything by it. You didn't take it quite in the right way."

"My dear chap," said Jimmy, "you needn't make excuses. They're not wanted here. I know how to take a girl of Barbara's age all right. I'm not saying anything against her either. She's young; that's all that's the matter with her. In a few years' time any fellow will be pleased to talk to her, and I shouldn't wonder if she didn't turn out as well worth taking notice of as Caroline and Beatrix. I say, old chap, I'm sorry to hear about this business of B's. She seems rather under the weather about it. But she'll get over it in time, you'll see. There are lots of fellows left in the world. You won't have her long on your hands, unless I'm a Dutchman."

"It's rather a bore," said Bunting shortly. He had not known that Jimmy knew anything about this business of B's, and had not intended to refer to it. But as he did know, there would be no harm in discussing it with him. He rather wanted the opinion of another man on the subject. "I never saw the chap myself," he added. "But if the pater doesn't think it's good enough, that's enough for me."

"I say, old chap, you must get out of the way of calling your governor pater," said Jimmy. "It was all right at your private school, but it's a bit infantile for fellows of our age."

"Well, the Governor then," said Bunting, blushing hotly. "He saw the chap at the Bank, and told him he wasn't taking any. So the chap went away."

"What are they like on that bush?" asked Jimmy. "I don't care for this lot. Was there anything against the fellow? Ah, these are better. Not enough boodle, or something of that sort?"

"I don't think so," replied Bunting. "He's a rich chap, I think, and a sort of peer in his own country. 'Course I shouldn't care for one of the girls to marry a Frenchman myself."

"I haven't got that sort of feeling," said Jimmy. "It's rather *vieux jeu*. One of my aunts married a Frenchman; they've got a topping villa at Biarritz and I stayed with them last year. He's plus two at golf, and hunts and all that sort of thing. Just like one of us."

"I believe this chap is too," said Bunting. "Still if the Governor didn't care about it, it's enough for me."

"You said that before. You should get out of the way of repeating yourself, Grafton. It's the girl I'm thinking of. Rather hard luck on her, if she's in love with the fellow. However, there are lots of other fellows who'll be quite ready to take it on."

"You said that before. You should get out of the way of repeating yourself, Beckley."

"One up," admitted Jimmy. "I shouldn't let her mope if I were you. When girls are in that state they want amusing. She was quite lively at first this morning, and I was going to try and buck her up a bit after we'd played a set or two. But she went in before I could get to work. It comes over them sometimes,

you know. I shouldn't wonder if she weren't having a good blub at this very moment. It takes 'em like that."

"You seem to know a lot about it for a man of your age."

"Well, I do know a bit. I don't mind telling you, Grafton, as we're pals, and I know it won't go any further, that I was jolly well struck on a girl last winter. Used to meet her in the hunting-field and all that. I'm not sure I didn't save her life once. She was going straight for a fence where there was a harrow lying in the field just the other side that she couldn't see. I shouted out to her just in time."

"How did you know the harrow was there?"

"'Cos it happened to be on our own place, fortunately, and I remembered it. 'Course it was nothing that I did, really, but she'd have taken a nasty toss, I expect, even if she hadn't killed herself. She went quite white, and thanked me in a way that—well it showed what she thought of it. I believe if I'd said something then—she—I don't think she'd have minded."

"Why didn't you?"

"Oh, I don't know. I suppose I wasn't quite ready."

"You're generally ready enough."

"Ah, you don't know how it takes you, Grafton. You wait till your time comes. That girl could have done anything with me, as long as it kept on. She came to a ball we had that night, and I'd picked up a bit then. I'd made up my mind that if I'd done her a good turn I'd get something for it."

"What did you get?"

"Ah, you want to know too much. But I don't mind telling you that I danced with her four times, and she chucked over a fellow in his third year at Oxford for me."

"Was that all you got?"

"No, it wasn't. But I shan't tell you any more. It wouldn't be fair to the girl. It's all come to an end now, but I'm not going to give her away."

"Do I know her?"

"I can't tell you that either. You might spot who it was, and that wouldn't be quite fair to her. Fact of the matter is I rather fancy I left off before she did. That's the sort of thing girls don't like having known."

"Why did you leave off?"

"Oh, I don't know. She promised to write to me when I went back to Eton,—there, I've let that out—and she didn't do it for I don't know how long. I was rather sick about it, and when she did write I answered her rather coldly. I thought she'd write again and want to know what the matter was. But she didn't. That cooled me off, I suppose, and when I came back this time—well, I found there were other girls I liked better."

"Oh then you've seen her; so she must live about here. Is it Maggie Williams? I thought she was rather a pretty kid when she was at your house the other day."

"Maggie Williams! My dear chap, what are you thinking about? She's an infant in arms. How could

she have come to a dance at our house, and given me a carnation—there I've let that out. Maggie Williams! Why she gets ink on her fingers."

"I know she's thirteen because she told me so; and she's your parson's daughter; I don't see why she shouldn't have come to your ball."

"Well, she didn't anyhow; and I don't go in for baby-snatching. If I take to a girl she's got to know a bit."

"I don't know all the people about here yet. You might tell me whether I've seen her."

"No, my son. She wouldn't like it."

"I believe it's all swank. If she's grown up, and she let you kiss her, I expect it was just because she thought you were only a little boy, and it didn't matter."

"I never said I did kiss her."

"Well, you must have been an ass if you didn't."

"I didn't say I didn't either. But I don't mind telling you that I'd arranged a sitting-out place with a bit of mistletoe beforehand."

"You might tell me who it was."

"She's a very fine girl. Rides like a good 'un, and sticks at nothing. I don't say it's absolutely all over yet. I shall see what I feel about it next season. I like her best on a horse."

"Is it one of the Pembertons?"

"I've told you I shouldn't tell you who it was."

"Oh then it must be, or you'd have said no. They're all a bit too ancient for my taste."

"There's a lot of the kid in you still, Grafton. If you call Kate Pemberton ancient, I pity your taste. Still, if you're inclined to be gone on Maggie Williams, I dare say you *would* think Kate Pemberton ancient."

"You're an ass. I'm not gone on Maggie Williams. I only thought she was rather a nice kid. Was it really Kate Pemberton, Beckley? She is rather a topper, now you come to mention it."

"I don't say it is and I don't say it isn't. I say, I think we've made this bush look rather foolish. I vote we knock off now. How would it be if we went and routed B out and tried to cheer her up a bit?"

Bunting was doubtful about the expediency of this step, though he thanked his friend for the kind thought. "I'm leaving her alone a bit just now," he said. "To tell you the truth I'm not very pleased with her. She's not behaving very decently to the Governor."

"Well, I must say I rather sympathise with her there," said Jimmy, as they strolled across the lawn together. "I should always be inclined to take the girl's side in an affair of this sort. If one of my sisters ever comes across my Governor in that way, I think I shall back her up. But they're not so taking as yours; I expect I shall have the whole lot of them on my hands by and by."

"Oh, I don't think you will," said Bunting politely. "Of course your Governor is a good deal older than mine. He doesn't make a pal of you like ours does of us. That's why I don't like the way B is going on. It worries him. Of course he wouldn't have stopped

it at all if he hadn't a jolly good reason. She ought to see that."

"My dear chap, you can't expect a girl to see anything when she's in that state. I know what I'm talking about. Give her her head and she'll come round all right in time."

"Do you think she will?"

"I'm sure of it. You tell your Governor to leave her alone, and pretend not to notice."

"All right, I will. Shall I say that's the advice of James Beckley, Esquire? I say, what about a round with a mashie?"

"I'm game," said Jimmy. "Don't you think it would do B good to fish her out and have a foursome? I'm sorry for that little girl."

"Oh, leave her alone," said Bunting. "Perhaps she'll play after lunch."

"Just as you like, old man. I only thought I might do something to make her forget her troubles for a bit. My advice to you is to go gently with her. I'll give you two strokes in eighteen holes and play you for a bob."

CHAPTER XVIII

TWO CONVERSATIONS

THE reason for Graftons going up to London that day was that another of his sisters-in-law had taken a hand in the affair. Lady Handsworth, under whose wing Beatrix had enjoyed her London gaieties, had written to him to say that it was very important that she should see him. She should be passing through on such and such a day, and would he please come and lunch with her without fail. She had something very important, underlined, to say, which she couldn't write. She didn't want merely to expostulate with him, or to give him advice, which she knew he wouldn't take. As he had allowed her to look after Beatrix, and take a mother's place towards her, she felt that she had a right to a say in the matter of her marriage; so she hoped he wouldn't disappoint her; she didn't want to act in any way apart from him.

There was a veiled threat in this paragraph. There was always that feeling in his mind that something might be done behind his back by some kind sympathiser with Beatrix. Besides, he did owe something to Lady Handsworth. She played in some sort a mother's part towards Beatrix. To her, if to anybody, he had relegated the duty of watching any movement in the

marriage mart of Mayfair, and it was due to her that he should justify himself in his objections to a match that she evidently thought to be a suitable one. They all thought that. Unless he could justify himself he would remain to them as a mere figure of prejudice and unreason.

Lady Handsworth was a good deal older than Lady Grafton, and her manners were not so unbending. But she had a kind heart beneath her stately exterior, and had shown it to Beatrix. She had daughters of her own, and it was to be supposed that she wished to marry them off. They were not nearly so attractive as the Grafton girls whom she had successively chaperoned. But she had made no differences between them, and both Caroline and Beatrix were fond of her.

Part of the big house in Hill Street had been opened up for a few days. Lord Handsworth was in London, and two of the girls were with their mother, but Grafton lunched alone with his sister-in-law, and the servants only came in at the necessary intervals.

She wanted, of course, to know the whys and wherefores of what she evidently considered an unreasonable action on his part, and he resigned himself to going over the ground again. "I can't think why you and Mary don't see it as I do," he said when he had done so. "You're neither of you women who think that money and position are the only things that would matter, and you, at any rate, can't think that it's going to spoil B's life not to marry a man she's fallen in love with at eighteen."

"I'm not sure that that isn't more important than you think, George," she said. "Of course she'll get over it, and, of course, she'll marry somebody else, if she doesn't marry him. But there's nothing quite like the first love, for a girl, especially when she's like B, who has never thought about it, as most girls do, and it has come as a sort of revelation to her."

Grafton felt some surprise at the expression of this view from her. "Yes, if she had fallen in love with the right sort of fellow," he said. "I wish she had, if she has to marry young. Margaret married like that, and she and I were as happy together as two people could be. But a fellow of Lassigny's age, with all that sort of life as his background—taking a sudden fancy to her, and she to him—you're not going to found the happiness Margaret and I had on that, my dear Katherine."

"No two people are alike," said Lady Handsworth; "and you can't tell how any marriage will turn out from that point of view. All that one can say is that a girl ought to have a right to work it out for herself, unless there's a very obvious objection to the man. There isn't here. And you have three daughters, George. You won't be able to pick husbands for all of them that exactly suit your views. You've given me some responsibility in the matter, you know. I own I didn't see this coming on, but if I had I should have thought it was just the right thing. It is as good a match as you could want for any of the girls."

"Oh, a good match! You know I don't care much about that, if it's the right sort of fellow."

"Well, you knew Lassigny. At one time I thought it was quite likely that he would propose for Caroline. You had seen him with her yourself constantly, and never made any objections to him. He had dined with you, and you even asked him down to Abington with us. One would have said that you would have welcomed it. I, at least, would never have supposed that you would treat it as if it were a thing quite out of the question."

"Well, there *is* something in all that, Katherine. But I suppose the fact is that a woman—especially a woman in the position you've been towards B—is always on the lookout for something to happen between a man and a girl who make friends. I can only tell you that I wasn't. I wouldn't have expected it to come on suddenly like that. I've known all about Caroline and her friendships. I suppose you know that Francis Parry wants to marry her. She told me all about it. She's told me about other proposals she's had. That seems to me the normal course with girls who can tell everything to their father, as mine can to me."

She laughed at him quietly. "Caroline has never been in love," she said, "or anywhere near it. Of course she tells you everything, because she wants an excuse for not doing what she thinks perhaps she ought to do. She puts the responsibility on you. When she does fall in love you will very likely know nothing about it until she tells you just as B did."

He laughed in his turn. "I know Caroline better

than you do," he said. "And I thought B was like her. I'm very distressed about the way she's taking this, Katherine. She's a different child altogether. A day or two ago I thought she was beginning to get over it; but she mopes about and is getting thin. She doesn't want to go away either, though there are plenty of people who want her. And between her and me, instead of being what it always has been,—well, she's like a different person. I hardly know her. There has been no time in my life when things have gone so wrong —except when Margaret died. And until this happened we were enjoying ourselves more than ever. You saw how we'd got ourselves into the right sort of life when you came to Abington. It's all changed now."

"Poor George!" she said. "You couldn't expect it to last quite like that at Abington, you know. You should have bought your country house ten years ago, when the girls were only growing up. You can't keep them there indefinitely. As for B, you can change all that trouble for yourself easily enough. I think, in spite of what you say, you must see that there was not a good enough reason for refusing Lassigny for her. Let it come on again and she'll be happy enough; and she'll be to you what she always has been."

"Oh, my dear Katherine, you, and Mary, and everybody else, quite ignore the fact that it is Lassigny who has withdrawn himself. If I wanted him for B, which I certainly don't, how could I get him? *You* don't propose, I should think, that I should write to him and ask him to reconsider his withdrawal."

"No, but there are other ways. If you were to withdraw your opposition, and it were known to him that you had done so! I think you ought not to make too much of his withdrawal. He had every right to suppose that you would not object to him as a husband for one of the girls. No man could think anything else after he had been treated as you treated him, and his position is good enough for him to consider himself likely to be welcomed as a suitor. He would be, by almost every parent in England. You can't be surprised at his having taken offence. It would be just as difficult for him to recede from the position you forced him into as for you."

He was silent. "I really don't think it's fair on B to leave it like this," she said. "She will get over it, of course; but she will always think that you hastily decided something for her that she ought to have decided for herself."

"Perhaps it was decided too hastily," he said unwillingly. "I should have been satisfied, I think, to have had a delay. I should always have hated the idea, but——"

"Would you consent now to a delay, if he were to come forward again?"

"Oh, my dear Katherine, what are you plotting? Why not let the child get over it, as she will in a few months?"

"You don't yourself think that she'll get over it in a few months, so as to bring her back to you what she was before. I've plotted nothing, George. I should

have left it altogether alone, but I have been asked to talk to you. Mme. de Lassigny is in England. She wants to see you about it. That was why I asked you to come up. She is at Claridge's. She would like you to go and see her there this afternoon. Or she would come here."

"Do you know her?"

"No. But Lady Ardrishaig does. They have met. She wrote to me. I think you ought to see her, George. You have admitted that it was all done too hastily, with him. If your objections to him are reasonable you ought to be able to state them so that others can accept them."

"It will be a very disagreeable interview, Katherine."

"It need not be. And you ought not to shirk it on that account."

"I don't want to shirk anything. Very well, I will go and see this good lady. Oh, what a nuisance it all is! I wish we'd never seen the fellow."

The telephone was put into operation, and Grafton went immediately to Claridge's. The Marquise received him in a room full of the flowers and toys with which rich travelling Americans transform their temporary habitations into a semblance of permanence. She was of that American type which coalesces so well with the French aristocracy. Tall and upright, wonderfully preserved as to face and figure; grey hair beautifully dressed; gowned in a way that even a man could recognise as exceptional; rather more jewelled than an Englishwoman would be in the day-time, but not ex-

cessively so for essential suitability; vivacious in speech and manner, but with a good deal of the *grande dame* about her too. The interview was not likely to be a disagreeable one, if she were allowed to conduct it in her own fashion.

She thanked Grafton pleasantly for coming to see her, and then plunged immediately into the middle of things. "You and my son hardly finished your conversation," she said. "I think you slightly annoyed one another, and it was broken off. I hope you will allow me to carry it on a little further on his behalf. And I must tell you, to begin with, Mr. Grafton, that he has not asked me to do so. But we mothers in France love our sons—I am quite French in that respect—and I know he is very unhappy. You must forgive an old woman if she intervenes."

She could not long since have passed sixty, and but for her nearly white hair would not have looked older than Grafton himself. He made some deprecatory murmur, and she proceeded.

"I have long wanted René to range himself," she said. "He will make a good husband to a girl whom he loves —I can assure you of that, for I know him very well. He loves your little daughter devotedly, Mr. Grafton. Fortunately, I have seen her for myself, once or twice here in London, though I have never spoken to her. I think she is the sweetest thing. I should adore him to marry her. Won't you think better of it, Mr. Grafton? I wouldn't dare to ask you—I have really come to

London on purpose to do it—if I weren't sure that you were mistaken about him."

"How am I mistaken about him?" asked Grafton. "I am very English, you know. We have our own ideas about married life. I needn't defend them, but I think they're the best there are. They're different from the French ideas. They're different from your son's ideas. He made that plain, or we shouldn't have parted as we did."

"Well, I am glad you have put it in that direct way," she said. "I have a great deal of sympathy with your ideas; they're not so different from those in which I was brought up. I wasn't brought to Europe to marry a title, as some of our girls are. It was a chance I did so. I was in love with my husband, and my married life was all I could wish for, as long as it lasted. It would be the same, I feel sure, with your daughter."

Grafton smiled at her. "If we are to talk quite directly," he said "—and it's no good talking at all if we don't—I must say that, as far as I can judge, American women are more adaptable than English. They adapt themselves here to our ideas, when they marry Englishmen, and they adapt themselves to Frenchmen, whose ways are different from ours. I don't think an English girl could adapt herself to certain things that are taken for granted in France. I don't think that a girl like mine should be asked to. She wouldn't be prepared for it. It would be a great shock to her if it happened. She would certainly have

a right to blame her father if she were made unhappy by it. I don't want my daughters to blame me for anything."

She had kept her eyes steadily fixed on him. "Well, Mr. Grafton," she said, "we won't run away from anything. Can you say of any man, French or English or American, who is rich and lives a life chiefly to amuse himself, that he is always going to remain faithful to his wife? How many young Englishmen of the type that you would be pleased to marry your daughter to could you say it of, for certain?"

"Of a good many. And I should say there wasn't one who wouldn't intend to keep absolutely straight when he fell in love with a girl and wanted to marry her. If he wasn't like that, I think one would know, and feel exactly the same objection as I must admit I feel towards your son."

"Oh, but you do mistake him. It was because you doubted him that he took such offence. As he said to me, it was like saying that your own daughter was not worthy to be loved for all her life."

Grafton felt a sudden spurt of resentment. His voice was not so level as usual as he said: "It's easy enough to put it in that way. He said much the same to me. Of course she's worthy to be loved all her life. Would you guarantee that she always would be?"

There was the merest flicker of her eyelids before she replied: "How could one guarantee any such thing for any man, even for one's own son? All I can tell you is that he will make her a devoted husband, and

her chances of happiness are as great with him as if he were an Englishman. I won't say that he has never loved another woman. That would be absurd. What I can say is that he does love no one else, and that he loves her in such a way as to put the thought of other women out of his mind. That is exactly what love that leads to marriage should be, in my opinion. Don't you agree with me, Mr. Grafton?"

"Yes," he said. "It ought to do that."

"And if it does, what more have you a right to ask? Our men are chivalrous. The very fact of his marrying an innocent English girl, who would be hurt by what she had had no experience of would act with my son—or I should think with any gentleman."

"Frenchmen generally marry innocent girls, don't they, Madame?"

"You mean that it doesn't prevent them leaving them afterwards. Well, perhaps not always. But surely, Mr. Grafton, you do ask too much, don't you? If he loves her and she loves him, it isn't reasonable to keep them apart, is it?"

He paused for a moment before asking: "How am I keeping them apart?"

"Would you allow them to come together again?" she asked in her turn.

He stirred uneasily in his chair. The thought of his little B once more living with him moved him. "I think it would be better if they didn't," he said. "But if—after a time——"

"Oh, I don't mean now at once," she said. "Indeed

that would be impossible, for I have persuaded him to go to America. He is to start very shortly, and won't be in England again before he goes."

Grafton felt a considerable sense of relief at this statement. "How long is he to be away?" he asked.

"Oh, I hope for the winter, if he amuses himself. But he may want to hunt in England."

"If you told him that he might see her again wouldn't he want to come back? Perhaps he wouldn't want to go. I think I should stipulate, anyhow, that he did go—or at least that he shouldn't see her again, or write to her, say for six months. I think, perhaps, I haven't the right to reject him altogether, on the ground of my objections. But I do feel them strongly. It will be a grief to me if my daughter makes this marriage. I have a right, I think, to make sure that her feeling for him is at least strong enough to stand six months of being parted. If she is the same at the end of it, then perhaps I couldn't hold out. I think the same test might apply to him. It would relieve my fears somewhat for the future, if he still wants to marry her at the end of that time."

"Perhaps he won't, Mr. Grafton," she said, with a slight change of manner. "You may have asked yourself why I should have pleaded with you, as I have done, for permission for my son to pay addresses to your daughter. Though I should be proud of her, and should love her too, it would not be a brilliant match for my son. I might prefer another sort of match for him. As you have said, Americans make

good wives for French husbands—perhaps better than English girls. They do not demand so much."

He gathered that she was feeling uneasy at being in the position of asking for what she would have preferred to concede as a favour, and was rather amused at it. "I should have thought it would have suited you much better," he said, with a smile. "Why is it that you should not be satisfied with the unreasonable objections of an Englishman who ought to be pleased at the idea of his daughter marrying your son?"

"Because I don't hold rank to be the chief thing in marriage, any more than you do, Mr. Grafton," she answered him directly. "And money isn't wanted in this case, though more money is always useful in our world. It is just because I want for my son in marriage what you want for your daughter that I should like to see him marry her. It is that and because he loves her in the way that should make a happy marriage, and is very unhappy about her. I did think at first that it would be best that he should get over it, because to tell you the truth I was offended by the way in which you had received him, and didn't see how that could be got over. But I have put my pride in my pocket. Let him go to America, as it has been arranged, and stipulate, if you like, that nothing further shall be done or said, until he comes back again—or for six months. Then, if they are both of the same mind, let us make the best of it, Mr. Grafton, and acknowledge that they

are two people who are meant to marry. Won't you have it that way?"

"I won't say no," said Grafton. "But, you know, Madame, you have brought another consideration into the situation. He is to be free, I take it, to pay his addresses to somebody else, if he feels inclined, and that, I suppose, was what you had in your mind when you persuaded him to go to America. It's only because I hate seeing my little daughter unhappy that I am giving way. If he changes his mind, during the next six months, and she doesn't——"

"She will be more unhappy than ever, I suppose. Yes, there is that risk. It happens always when two people are kept apart in the hope of one of them changing their mind."

He laughed, and rose to take his farewell. "What I shall tell my daughter is that she must consider it over for the present," he said. "But if he makes an offer for her again next year, I shall reconsider it."

"I don't think you need do more, Mr. Grafton," she said.

Caroline, only, met her father at the station. He was disappointed that Beatrix hadn't come. His mind had been lighter about her than for some time, as he had travelled down. It had been greatly disturbing him to be at issue with this much-loved child of his, and to lose from her all the pretty ways of

affection that had so sweetened his life. He knew that he had given way chiefly because the results of his holding out against her were hardly supportable to himself. She had the 'pull' over him, as the one who loves least always has in such a contest. His weapons were weak in his hands. But he did not mind much; for there was the prospect of getting back again to happy relations, and that counted for more than anything. She would be grateful to him, and give him her love again.

He could not have felt quite like this about it if he had given in entirely because he wanted to please Beatrix. It was necessary that he should find some other justification for himself; and it was not difficult to find. If Lassigny still wanted to marry her after six months' parting and she wanted it too, it would be unreasonable to object on the grounds that he had taken. His dislike of Lassigny, which had not existed at all before, had died down. Seen in the light of his mother's faith in him, he was a figure more allied to the suitor that Grafton would have accepted without such questionings as his foreign nationality had evoked. For the time being he could think of an eventual marriage without shrinking. But this state of mind was probably helped by the consideration that anything might happen in six months. It was at least a respite. There was no need to worry now about what should come after.

He told Caroline what had happened as they drove home together. He had said nothing beforehand of

his going up to see Lady Handsworth. He had not wanted again to have Beatrix's hopes raised, and to suffer the chill of her disappointment.

"Everybody seems to think that I'm most unreasonable," he said. "I'm half-beginning to think so myself. I suppose B will forget all about what's been happening lately when I tell her, won't she?"

"Oh, yes, darling," said Caroline. "She loves you awfully. She'll be just what she always has been to you."

"Oh well, that's all right then. I shall be precious glad to go back to the old state of things. I may have been unfair to her in one or two points, but I'm sure I've been right in the main. If there's to be nothing settled for six months that's all I can ask. I think I should have been satisfied with that at first. At least I should have accepted it."

"So would B. She said so."

"Yes, I know. You told me. How jolly it is to get down here after London! We're all going to enjoy ourselves at Abington again now. Let's get up early to-morrow, shall we?"

The early risings had been given up of late. The edge of pleasure in the new life and the new place had become blunted. But it all seemed bright again now, and the country was enchanting in the yellow evening light.

So was the house when they reached it. September was half-way through, and though the days were warm and sunny, there was a chill when the sun had gone

down. A wood fire was lit in the long gallery, which with curtains closed, lamps and candles lit, and masses of autumn flowers everywhere about it, was even more welcoming than in its summer state.

Grafton sat there with Beatrix on a sofa before the fire. Her head was on his shoulder and his arm was round her. She cried a little when he told her, but she was very happy. She was also very merry throughout the evening, but alternated her bursts of merriment with the clinging tenderness towards him which he had so missed of late. It was only when he was alone in his room that a cold waft came over his newfound contentment. He had forgotten all about Lassigny for the time being. Could he ever accept Lassigny as part of all this happy intimate family life? He would have to, if Beatrix were to get what she wanted, and were still to remain allied to it. But Lassigny hardly seemed to fit in, even at his best. He was all very well as a guest; but when they were alone together, as they had been this evening—— Oh, if only B could see her mistake!

CHAPTER XIX

MOLLIE WALTER

It was a wet windy morning. Mollie Walter sat with her needlework in the little drawing-room of Stone Cottage, and looked disconsolately through the French window at the havoc that was being wrought among the late summer flowers in the garden. It was a bright little tight little garden, with flower borders round a square lawn, and ground for vegetables beyond a privet hedge. A great walnut tree overshadowed it, and the grass was already littered with twigs and leaves. Such a garden had to be kept 'tidy' at all costs, and Mollie was wondering how she should be able to manage it, when the autumn fall of leaves should begin in earnest. Her mother was in bed upstairs, with one of her mild ailments, which never amounted to actual illness. Mollie had left her to sleep for an hour, and was hoping for a visit from Beatrix, to relieve her loneliness. She had not minded being much alone until lately, but now that she had more real friends than she had ever had in her life she wanted them constantly.

There was a ring at the bell, and Mollie went out to open the door. Yes, it was her dear Beatrix, looking more beautiful than ever, though her long raincoat was buttoned up beneath her chin, and only her flower-

like face could be seen. But it was shining with happiness and laughter, as she struggled with the wind to get her umbrella down, before entering the little hall.

"Oh, what weather!" she exclaimed, as the door was shut behind her. "But I had to come to tell you, Moll. It's all right. My darling old Daddy has come to his senses. I'm not angry with him any more."

The two girls embraced warmly. "I knew you'd be pleased," said Beatrix, laughing out of pure lightness of heart, as she took off her coat. "I had to come and tell you. Oh, I'm as happy as a queen."

Presently they were sitting together by the window, and Beatrix was telling her story. "I don't mind the six months a bit," she said when she had finished. "I should have, at first, but I don't now. It's getting out of all the horridness at home that I'm so glad of. I hated not being friends with Dad; I hated it much more than he thought I did."

"But he *was* unreasonable," said Mollie, who had not seen much of this disinclination during the past weeks.

"Oh, I don't know. Well, perhaps he was, but there were excuses for him. He does love me, and hated the idea of losing me. I believe he'd have been the same about anybody. Anyhow, it's all over now, and I've forgiven him. I'm going to reward him by being very good. I shan't talk about René at all, except sometimes to you, my dear. When the six months are over and he comes again, Dad will have got used to the idea. He *must* like him, you know, really. He is so

nice, and so good. The idea of *him* being like a Frenchman in a horrid novel! Men are rather like babies in what they can believe about each other, aren't they? I know a lot about men now, having two such nice ones to love as René and Daddy. Oh, I'm awfully happy now, Moll."

"I'm so glad," said Mollie sympathetically. "And six months isn't such an awful time to wait. But don't you think that if you say nothing about him Mr. Grafton will think you've forgotten him, and be very disappointed when he finds you haven't?"

Beatrix laughed. "I expect that's what he wants, poor darling!" she said. "Perhaps I shall say a little word now and then. And Caroline will know that I love him just as much as ever. Daddy will find out about it from her. He always does talk over everything with her."

"Is she very glad?"

"Oh, yes. She has to take Dad's part, but she's awfully sympathetic, really, and I don't think she has ever really understood what all the fuss was about. Nobody could, of course, because there isn't anything to make a fuss about. The dear old Dragon thinks Dad must be right, but then she's old, and I suppose she has never loved anybody very much and doesn't know what it's like. Caroline doesn't either, though she thinks she does. But *we* know, don't we, Mollie?"

Mollie suddenly took up the work that had been lying on her lap, and her face went red as she looked down

at it. "I ought to know, by the amount I've listened to about it from you," she said.

Beatrix laughed at her mischievously. "I don't think you'll hear very much more," she said. "I'm contented now. I feel comfortable all over me. I am going to begin to enjoy myself again. I shall go away on some visits soon, but I don't want to just yet, because I love being here, now that everything is all right at home."

Mollie's blush had died down. She left off using her needle and looked at Beatrix. "Are you sure you love him just as much as ever you did?" she asked.

"Oh, yes, I do. Of course I do," said Beatrix. "It doesn't leave off like that, you know. But I know how to wait. I'm much wiser than people think I am. I'm thinking of him all the time, and loving him, and I know he's thinking of me. He'll be so happy when his mother tells him that he may come and ask for me again. And then he'll be allowed to have me, and we shall both be as happy as happy all the rest of our lives. It's lovely to look forward to. It's what makes me not mind waiting a bit—or only a very little bit—now and then."

Mollie took up her work again. "If it were me, I think I should want to hear from him sometimes," she said, "or to see him. And you did feel like that at first."

"I know I did. Daddy not understanding, and putting everything wrong, made me sore and hurt all over, and with everybody. I was horrid even to Caroline,

who is always so sweet. I think I was with you too, a little—just at first."

"No, you never were with me. But you were with him, though you tried not to show it. I never said so before, because I didn't want to trouble you."

"Did it seem to you like that?" Beatrix said thoughtfully. "I'm so happy now that I've forgotten. Well, I suppose at first I was hurt with him too. I couldn't understand his giving me up so easily. It seemed to me like that. But, of course, it wasn't. I ought to have trusted him. I think you *must* trust the people you love, even if you don't understand. You see he's been dying for me all the time. Mme. de Lassigny coming to Dad like that, and telling him—it's like having a window opened. I can see him now, wanting me, just as I want him. Perhaps I was a little doubtful about it, but I ought not to have been. I shan't be any more. Oh, I do trust him, and love him."

There had been another ring at the front door bell while she had been talking, and now Mrs. Mercer was shown into the room.

The little lady's manner was combined of effusiveness and nervousness. She had come to see Mrs. Walter, if she was well enough, but wouldn't hear of her being disturbed if she was resting. She could easily come at another time. She was so pleased to see Beatrix looking so well. But what a horrid change in the weather! It did look as if the summer had come to an end at last. She had really thought of lighting a fire this morning. No, she wouldn't sit down. She had heaps of

things to do. If Mrs. Walter couldn't see her she would come in later.

Mollie thought her mother would be pleased to see her, and went upstairs. Mrs. Mercer did consent to sit down until she returned, but her manner was as jerky as before. Beatrix liked her and would have been ready to tell her the news that was filling her mind. But there was no opportunity before Mollie came back. Mrs. Mercer went upstairs with her, after shaking hands warmly with Beatrix, and saying that she supposed she would have gone before she came down again.

Mollie looked rather disturbed when she came back into the room and shut the door after her. Beatrix looked at her as she took her seat again, and said: "Tell me about it, Moll. You know we're friends, and I've told you everything about myself, and about René."

"Oh, well," said Mollie, with an intonation of relief. "I've told you everything so far. I'm afraid she has come to make trouble."

"And her husband has sent her, I suppose. I don't think she'd want to make trouble on her own account. She's nice."

"She *is* nice, isn't she? All of you think so, don't you?"

"Yes, we like her. If it weren't for her horrid husband we should like her very much. Unfortunately you can't divide them. She's too much under his thumb."

"I don't think I should put it quite like that," said Mollie hesitatingly.

"No, I know you wouldn't," said Beatrix quickly. "And that's why you can never get it quite straight. He *is* horrid, and he's horrid in nothing more than the way he treats you."

"He has always been very kind to me—to me and mother too. *Really* kind, I mean, up till a little time ago, before you came—and I don't want to forget it."

"Yes, kind, I suppose, in the way he'd have liked to be kind to *us*. If he had had his way we should have been bosom friends, and he'd have half-lived in the house."

"We hadn't anything to give him in return, as you would have had. It wasn't for that he was kind to us."

"My dear child, you know he's horrid—with girls. It was quite enough that you were a pretty girl."

"But he wasn't like that with me, B. I should have known it if he had been."

"No, you wouldn't, my dear. Vera Beckley never knew it till he tried to kiss her."

Mollie flinched a little at this directness. "Don't you think she may have made too much fuss about that?" she said. "He's years and years older than she is—old enough to be her father."

"Yes, of course, that's always the excuse. Moll darling, you haven't lived enough in the world. You don't know men. Besides Vera didn't make a fuss.

Her people did, because they happened to catch him at it. It must have been a glorious occasion. I wish I'd been there. She only told us about it in strict confidence, and with the idea of opening *your* eyes."

"I still think she needn't have thought so much of it; and Mrs. Beckley needn't have, either. Anyhow, he has never kissed me. I don't think I should have thought anything of it if he had."

"I don't suppose you would. That's what they rely on—men like that—horrid old men. And you came here just after that had happened with Vera. Naturally he'd be a bit careful."

"I think you're rather horrid about it, yourself, B. I certainly have been angry the way he has behaved since, but I can't see that *that* comes in, and I don't believe it does."

"Well, I'm quite sure it does. But what do you think he has sent Mrs. Mercer here about?"

Mollie hesitated for a moment. "Mrs. Mercer has been talking lately," she said, "as if I had quite given them up since you came. You know—little bits stuck in every now and then, when she's talking about something else. 'Oh, of course, we can't expect to see much of you now, Mollie.' All that sort of thing. It makes me uncomfortable. And she wasn't like it at first. She was so pleased that I had made friends with you."

"He has talked her over to it. That's what I meant when I said she was under his thumb. Do you think he has sent her here then to complain to you mother?"

"I think she is talking me over with mother."

"But Mrs. Walter was angry when *he* interfered, wasn't she?"

"Oh, yes, she was. But she has made excuses for him since. He ought not to have said what he did. But he meant well."

"I think it was disgusting, what he said; perfectly outrageous. And I don't think he meant well either. It's all part of what I tell you. He hates anybody having anything to do with you but himself." She changed her tone. "Moll darling," she said coaxingly, "you might tell me about it. I've told you everything about myself."

Mollie took up her work, and kept her eyes fixed upon it. "Tell you about what," she asked. "I *am* telling you everything."

"You do like him, don't you? It's quite plain he likes you."

"What, the Vicar?"

Beatrix laughed, on a thrushlike note of enjoyment. "You know I don't mean the Vicar," she said. "What happens when you and he go off from the tennis lawn together?"

"Oh, you mean Bertie Pemberton," said Mollie, enlightened, but still keeping her eyes on her work. "They are going to give me some plants for the garden, and we have been choosing them. He knows a lot about flowers."

Beatrix laughed again. "Do you like him, Mollie?" she asked.

"Yes, of course I do," said Mollie. "But don't

be silly about it, B. Can't a girl like a man without—without—— You're just like what you complain about in the Vicar, and think so horrid in him."

"No, I'm not, my dear. The Vicar takes it for granted that he means nothing except just to amuse himself with a pretty girl. I don't think that at all. I know the signs. I've seen more of the world, and of men, than you have, Mollie. I know by the way he looks at you, and by the way he talks about you."

Mollie's face, which she never once raised, was pink. "It's very kind of him to interest himself in me," she said. "What does he say?"

Beatrix laughed again. "You're awfully sweet," she said affectionately. "He thinks you're so much nicer than all the smart young women in London. That was one for me, but I didn't show any offence. I said you were, and as good as gold. That seemed to surprise him rather, and I had to tell him why I thought so. He wanted to hear all about you. I think your ears must have burned. He thinks you're awfully *kind*. That was his great word for you. You know, I think he's awfully nice, Mollie. All the Pembertons are, when you get down beneath the noise they make. They love their country life, and all the nice things in it."

Mollie raised her eyes at last. "That's what I do like about him," she said, speaking steadily, but with the blush still on her cheeks. "I think I've found out that he really has simple tastes, though I shouldn't

have thought it at first. He goes about a lot in London, but he doesn't really care about it. He says he makes a good deal of money, but what is the good of money if you're not living the life you want?"

There was a twinkle in Beatrix's eyes, but she replied gravely: "That's what he told me. He's had enough of it. He'd like himself much better living here on his allowance, and only going to London occasionally. I think if you were to advise him to do that, Mollie, he would."

Mollie took up her work again hastily. "Oh, I couldn't very well advise him about a thing like that," she said. "I don't know enough about it."

"Hasn't he asked your advice?"

"No, not exactly. He has only just mentioned it, and I said——"

"What did you say?"

"I said perhaps he would be happier living quietly in the country. I thought a quiet country life was the nicest of all."

"It wouldn't be very quiet where any of the Pembertons were, but——"

"Oh, but they only talk so loud because old Mr. Pemberton is so deaf. They are quite different when you are alone with one of them. Nora has told me a lot about herself. I like Nora very much, and I'm rather sorry for her in a way. She seems so independent and satisfied with everything, but she likes having a girl friend, all the same. Of course I don't

love her as I do you, B; but I do like her, awfully. It's she who's really my friend at Grays."

"Is it?" said Beatrix, and laughed again, gently.

At that moment Mrs. Mercer was heard coming downstairs. She took her leave on the same note of hurried aloofness as that on which she had entered, and immediately afterwards Mrs. Walter knocked on the floor of her room above in summons of her daughter.

Beatrix kissed Mollie good-bye. "Don't be frightened, darling," she said. "We can easily get the better of Lord Salisbury between us. Come to tea this afternoon and tell me all about it."

Mrs. Walter, sitting up in bed with a dressing-jacket on her thin frame, looked flustered. "I think there is something in what she says, Mollie dear," she said at once. "I want to talk to you about it."

"I knew she had come to talk about me," said Mollie. "I told Beatrix so."

"Well, that is one of the things," said her mother. "Aren't you and Beatrix rather inclined to encourage each other in setting yourself against—against——"

"What, against the Vicar, Mother?"

"I didn't mean that. But there's Beatrix certainly setting herself against her father's wishes, and——"

"Oh, but Mr. Grafton has given way. She came to tell me so. She is not to see M. de Lassigny for six months, but after that they are to be allowed to be engaged."

Mrs. Walter was rather taken aback. "Oh!" she said. "Mrs. Mercer didn't know that."

"But what has it got to do with Mrs. Mercer, Mother? Or with the Vicar?—because, of course, it is he who has sent her. You know that the Graftons don't like the way in which he tries to direct them in their affairs. I told you that they had told me that. Surely it isn't for him or Mrs. Mercer to interfere in such a thing as B's engagement—and to try to do it through me!"

"I don't think they have any idea of interfering, but they do take a great interest in you, Mollie; and, of course, they were everything to you before the Graftons came. I can't wonder that they are a little hurt that you make such a very intimate friend of Beatrix, and that they feel themselves shut out now. At least—that Mrs. Mercer does. I don't think it is so much the Vicar. And you are wrong in thinking that he sent her. She said expressly that she came of her own accord. He didn't even know that she was coming."

"Oh!" said Mollie. She had a dim idea that he had had a good deal to do with her coming, all the same, but did not express the doubt, or even examine it.

"Mollie dear," said Mrs. Walter, with a sudden change of tone. "Is there anything between you and young Pemberton? I've hoped you would have said something to me. But you know, dear, it *does* seem a little as if everything were for Beatrix Grafton now."

Mollie was stricken to the heart. Her mother's thin anxious face, and the very plainness which sits heavily

upon women who are middle-aged and tired, when they are without their poor armour of dress, seemed to her infinitely pathetic. She folded her mother with her warm fresh young body. "Oh, my darling," she said through her tears. "I love you better than anybody in the world. I shall never, never forget what you've done for me and been to me. I've only told you nothing because there's nothing to tell."

Mrs. Walter cried a little too. She had struggled for so many years to have her child with her, and it had seemed to her, with the struggle over, and peace and security settling down upon them both in this little green-shaded nest of home, that she had at last gained something that would fill the rest of her days with contentment. 'Some day' Mollie would marry; but she had never looked so far forward. It had been enough for her to take the rest and the love and companionship with gratitude and an always increasing sense of safety and contentment in it. But it had already become a little sapped. She was glad enough that her child should have found friends outside, as long as she remained unchanged at home, but the friction about it had disturbed her in her dreams of peace, and she wanted to be first with her daughter as long as she should keep her with her.

Mollie felt something of all of this on her behalf, and it brought a sense of compunction to her generous young heart. She loved her mother. It was not a case between them of satisfying the exigencies of a parent out of a sense of duty. It touched her deeply that

her mother should show her she wanted her, and she responded instantly to the longing.

"If you don't want me to go to Grays any more I won't," she said, and had no feeling that she was making any renunciation as she said it.

"Well dear," said Mrs. Walter. "I do think it would be better if you didn't go quite so often. Every time you do go there is always that feeling that perhaps it would be better not—after what the Vicar said. I was annoyed about it then, but perhaps after all he saw more clearly than I did. He shouldn't have supposed, of course, that *you* were in any way to blame, and, if he thought that I was, he ought to have said so quietly to me alone. But perhaps it is true that by being at the beck and call of people, as you must rather seem to be to outsiders, considering the difference there is between the Pembertons and ourselves—— Don't you see what I mean, dear?"

"Yes, Mother," said Mollie submissively. She had a sense of forlornness as she said it, but put it away from her, sitting by her mother's side on the bed, with her arm around her shoulders. "I won't go there so much. I'll never go unless you tell me that you'd like me to. I'm afraid I've been gadding about rather too much, and neglecting you, darling. But you know I love to be with you best of all. We're very happy living here together, aren't we?"

Her tears flowed again, and once more when she left her mother to rest a little longer. But she busied herself resolutely about the house, and when a gleam of

sun shone through the scudding clouds thought how happy she was living there with her mother. But she did not feel quite so happy as she ought to have done. It was as if she had closed for herself a window in the little cottage, which opened into a still brighter world.

CHAPTER XX

A MEET AT WILBOROUGH

It was the first day of the Christmas holidays, and a fine hunting morning, with clouds that showed no immediate threat of rain, and a soft air that contained an illusive promise of spring. Young George, looking out of his bedroom window, found life very good. Previous Christmas holidays had held as their culmination visits to country houses in which he might, if he were lucky, get two or three days' hunting; but hunting was to be the staple amusement of these holidays, with a young horse all his own upon which his thoughts were set with an ardour almost lover-like. He was to shoot too, with the men. His first gun had been ordered from his father's gun-maker, and Barbara had told him that it had already come, and was lying snugly in its baize-lined case of new leather, with his initials stamped upon it, ready for the family present-giving on Christmas morning. Furthermore there would be a large and pleasant party at the Abbey for Christmas, and other parties to follow, with a ball in the week of New Year. Young George, under the maturing influence of Jimmy Beckley, had come to think that a grown-up ball might be rather good fun, especially in one's own house, and with country neighbours

coming to it, most of whom one knew. There would be other festivities in other country houses, including a play at Feltham Hall, which Jimmy, who was a youth of infinite parts, had written himself during the foregoing term. Kate Pemberton, to whom his fancy had returned on the approach of the hunting season, was to be asked to play the heroine, with himself as the hero. There were also parts for the Grafton girls and for Young George, who had kindly been given permission to write his own up if he could think of anything he fancied himself saying. The play was frankly a melodrama, and turned upon the tracking down of a murderer through a series of strange and exciting adventures. Young George had first been cast for the professional detective—Jimmy, of course, playing the unprofessional one, who loves the heroine—but, as no writing up of the part had prevented it being apparent that the professional detective was essentially a fool, he had changed it for that of the villain. Young George rather fancied himself as the villain, who was compounded of striking attitudes, personal bravery and occasional biographical excursions revealing a career of desperate crime, to which he had added, with Jimmy's approval, a heart not altogether untouched by gentler emotions. Maggie Williams was to be his long-lost little sister, the thought of whom was to come over him when he was stirred to his blackest crimes, aided by a vision of her face through transparent gauze at the back of the stage; and she was to appear to him in person on his deathbed, and give him a chance of a

really effective exit from a troubled and, on the whole, thoroughly ill-used world. It would be great fun, getting ready for it towards the end of the holidays, and would agreeably fill in the time that could not be more thrillingly employed in the open air. He was not sure that he would even want to go up to London for the few nights' play-going that had been suggested. There would be quite enough to do at Abington, which seemed to him about the jolliest place that could be found in England, which to an incipient John Bull like Young George naturally meant the world.

The meet was to be at Wilborough. The whole Grafton family turned out for it. George Grafton had hunted regularly two days a week with the South Meadshire since the opening of the season, and the three girls had been almost as regular, though they had all of them been away on visits for various periods during the autumn. Young George felt proud of his sisters as he saw them all mounted. He had not thought that they would show up so well in circumstances not before familiar. But they all looked as if horses had been as much part of their environment as they had been of the Pemberton girls, though in their young grace and beauty, which neither hats nor habits could disguise, not so much as if it had been their only environment.

There are few scenes of English country life more familiar than a meet of hounds, but it can scarcely ever fail to arouse pleasure in contemplation. It is something so peculiarly English in its high seriousness

over a matter not of essential importance, and its gathering together of so many who have the opportunities to make what they will of their lives and choose this ordered and ancient excitement of the chase as among the best that life can offer them. If the best that can be said for it in some quarters is that it keeps the idle rich out of mischief for the time being, it is a good deal to say. The idle rich can accomplish an enormous amount of mischief, as well as the rich who are not idle, and perhaps accomplish rather less in England than elsewhere. For a nation of sportsmen is at least in training for more serious things than sport, and courage and bodily hardness, some self-discipline, and readiness to risk life and limb, are attributes that are not to be gained from every form of pleasure. There was not a boy or a young man among all those who gathered in front of Wilborough House on that mild winter morning to enjoy themselves who did not come up to the great test a few years later. The pleasures, and even the selfishness, of their lives were all cast behind them without a murmur; they were ready and more than ready to serve.

But the great war had not yet cast its shadow over the mellowed opulent English country. Changes were at work all round to affect the life mirrored in its fair chart of hall and farm, village and market-place, park and wood and meadow, even without that great catastrophe looming ahead. But the life still went on, essentially unchanged from centuries back. From the squire in his hall to the labourer in his cottage, they

were in relation to each other in much the same way as their forefathers had been, living much the same lives, doing much the same work, taking much the same pleasures. For the end of these things is not yet.

Wilborough was a great square house of stone, wrapped round by a park full of noble trees, as most of the parks in that rich corner of Meadshire were. Its hall door stood widely open, and there was constant coming and going between the hospitalities within and the activities without. On the grass of the park and the gravel of the drive stood or moved the horses which generations of care and knowledge had brought to the pitch of perfection for the purpose for which they would presently be employed, and their sleek well-tempered beauty would have gladdened the eye of one who knew least about them. The huntsman and whips came up with the hounds—a dappled mob of eager, restless or dogged, free-moving muscle and intelligence, which also filled the eye. There were motor-cars, carriages and smart-looking carts, and a little throng of people of all sorts and conditions. The scene was set, the characters all on the stage, and there was England, in one of its many enchanting time-told aspects.

Old Sir Alexander Mansergh, in a well-worn pink coat of old-fashioned cut, was in front of the house as the party from Abington Abbey rode up. He was welcoming his guests with a mixture of warmth and ferocity peculiarly English. He was an old bear, a tyrant, an ignoramus, a reactionary. But his tenants respected him, and his servants stayed with him. There

was a gleam in his faded old eyes as he greeted the Grafton family, with the same gruffness as he used towards everybody else. He liked youth, and beauty, and these girls weren't in the least afraid of him, and by their frank treatment brought some reflection of the happy days of his youth into his crusty old mind—of the days when he had not had to wrap himself up in a mantle of grumpiness as a defence against the shoulders of the world, which turn from age. He had laughed and joked with everybody then, and nobody had been afraid of him.

"My son Richard's at home," he said. "Want to introduce him to you girls. All the nice girls love a sailor, eh?"

This was Sir Alexander's 'technique,' as the Graftons had it. Nice girls must always be running after somebody, in the world as the old bashaw saw it. But it did not offend them, though it did not exactly recommend 'my son Richard' to them.

Of the three girls only Barbara accepted Sir Alexander's pressed invitation to 'come inside.' Caroline and Beatrix, comfortably ensconced in their saddles, preferred to stay there rather than face the prospect of mounting again in a crowd. But before the move was made Lady Mansergh waddled down the house steps accompanied by a young man evidently in tow, whom she presented to them forthwith, with an air that made plain her expectation that more would come of it. "My stepson, Richard—Captain Mansergh," she said, beaming over her broad countenance. "He knows who

all of *you* are, my dears, for I've never stopped talking of you since he came home. But in case there's any mistake, this is Caroline and this is Beatrix and this is Barbara; and if there's one of them you'll like better than the other, well, upon my word, I don't know which it is. And this is Mr. Grafton, and Young George. If Young George was a girl I should say the same of him."

Captain Mansergh was not so affected to awkwardness by this address as might have been expected, but shook hands cheerfully all round and produced the necessary introductory remarks with great readiness. He was not so young on a closer inspection as his trim alert figure had seemed to indicate. His open rather ugly face was much weathered, but a pair of keen sailor's eyes looked out of its chiselled roughness, and his clean-cut mouth showed two rows of strong white teeth. He was taller than most sailors, but carried his calling about him even in his smart hunting-kit. He was likeable at first sight, and the Grafton girls liked him, as he stood and talked to them, in spite of the obvious fact that they were on exhibition, and that one or other of them was expected to show more than liking for him at very short notice.

They discussed it frankly enough between themselves later on. "It can't be me, you know, because I'm already engaged," said Beatrix, "and it can't be Barbara, because she's too young. So it must be you, Caroline, and I don't think you could do much better. He's

really nice, and he won't be grumpy and bearish like old Sir Alexander when he gets old. That's very important. You must look ahead before you're caught. Of course when you *are* caught nothing makes any difference. If I thought René was going to turn into a grump when he gets old I shouldn't mind. At least I should mind, but I shouldn't want not to marry him. But I know he won't. I don't think my son Richard will either. He's much too nice."

"If neither of you want him he might do for me," said Barbara reflectively. "But I think I'd rather wait for a bit. Dad likes him very much. But I don't think he wants him for Caroline."

"He doesn't want anybody for any of us," said Caroline. "He wants to keep us. Most fathers would only be too glad to get one of us off, but he isn't like that. If he likes him to come here, I'm sure it isn't with any idea of that sort."

"I'm not so sure," said Barbara oracularly.

Pressed to explain, she advanced the opinion that their father hoped Richard Mansergh would fall in love with Beatrix, and she with him; but the idea was scouted by Beatrix almost with violence. She should love René, she said, as long as she lived, and would never, never give him up. She even became a little cross about it. She thought that her father was not quite keeping to the bargain. He made it impossible for her to talk to him about René, for whenever she tried to do so his face altered and shut down. She *wanted* to be able to talk to him about everything, but

how could he expect it if he cut himself off from the chief thing in her life? Well, she didn't care. She loved Dad, of course, and always should, but it *must* make a difference later on, if he wasn't going to accept the man she had chosen for her own, the man whom she loved and trusted.

This little outburst, which was received by Caroline with a mild expostulation, and by Barbara in silence, indicated a certain constraint that was growing up between Grafton and Beatrix. He had given way, but he could not get used to the idea of her marriage, nor take it as a thing settled and bound to happen. The six months' of parting and silence must surely work some change. Beatrix's bonds would be loosened, she would see with clearer eyes.

But more than half of the time of waiting was over, and Beatrix showed no sign of having changed. She only did not talk of her lover to him because he made himself such an unreceptive vessel for her confidence. It was as she said: if she did so, his face altered and shut down; and this was the expressive interpretation of his state of mind, which shrank from the disagreeable reminder of these two, so far apart in his estimation, considering themselves as one.

His thoughts of Lassigny had swung once more towards complete antagonism. He seemed to him far older than he really was, and far more immoral than he had any just reason to suppose him to be. He resented the assurance with which this outsider had claimed his sweet white child as his fitting mate, and

even the wealth and station that alone had given him that assurance. And he also resented the ease with which he had accepted his period of banishment. He would have been angry if Lassigny had tried to communicate with Beatrix directly, and would not have liked it if he had sought to do so indirectly. But he would not have liked anything that Lassigny did or didn't do. The image of him, coming to his mind, when perhaps he had been able to forget it for a time, jerked him down into a state of gloom. After a moment's silence his face would often be darkened by a sudden frown, which did not suit its habitual agreeable candour, and had seldom before been seen on it. It had been his habit to take his morning cup of tea into one of the children's rooms and chat with them, sitting on the bed, while they drank theirs. But his visits to Beatrix were always shorter than the others, because she had a photograph of Lassigny always propped up on the table by the side of her bed, so that she could see it when she first woke in the morning; and he couldn't stand that. He never sat down on her bed, because he could see the face of the photograph from it, but walked about the room, or sat in a chair some way off. And of course she knew the reason, but wouldn't put away the photograph before he came.

This was one of her little protests against his attitude; and there were others. She also could make her pretty face shut down obstinately, and did so whenever the conversation might have led naturally to men-

tion of her lover. She almost succeeded in creating the impression that it was she who refused to have his name mentioned. At times when the family contact seemed to be at its most perfect, and the happy occupied life of the Abbey was flowing along in its pleasant course, as if its inmates were all-sufficing to one another, it would be brought up with a sudden check. There was an irritating factor at work, like a tiny stone in a shoe, that settles itself where it cannot be felt except now and then, and must eventually be got rid of. But this influence could not be got rid of. That was Grafton's trouble.

If only he had known that on the night before the meet at Wilborough Beatrix had forgotten to prop Lassigny's photograph up against the emergency candlestick on her table! It had been in its usual place when he had gone into her room with the news that it was a fine hunting morning, a kiss and a word of censure for sleepy little girls who let their tea grow cold. He often began in that way, recognising her childishness, and the fact that so short a time ago she had been all his. Then the sight of that alien figure, to whom she had ceded the greater part of his rights in her, who could in no way be brought into the fabric of his life and his love, would stiffen him, dimming his sense of fatherhood and protection. Antagonism was taking its place, and a sense of injury. After all, he had given way. She had what she wanted, or would have when the period of probation was over, with no further opposition from him. Why couldn't she be

towards him as she had been before? She was changing under his eyes. It was only rarely now that he could think of her as his loving devoted little daughter.

The worst of it, for him, was that he had now no confidants to whom he could express himself as to the unhappiness and dissatisfaction that was working in him. Caroline, whose love for him and dependence upon him was an assuagement, yet did not seem to be wholly on his side. She seemed to be playing, as it were, a waiting game. The affair would be settled, one way or the other, when the six months had run their course. It was better not to talk of it in the meantime. She was all sympathy with him when he showed himself hurt and troubled by Beatrix's changed attitude, and he knew that she 'spoke' to Beatrix about it. But that did no good, and he could not use one daughter as a go-between with the other. Miss Waterhouse, having sagely expressed herself at the time when the affair was still in flux, had retired again into her shell. Worthing also took it for granted that, as he had conditionally given way, there was no more that could profitably be said about it until the time came for his promise to be redeemed; and perhaps not even then. If Lassigny should come to be accepted as a son-in-law, the obvious thing for him to do was to make the best of him.

Ah, but Worthing had no daughter of his own. He didn't know how hard it was to take second place, and to depend for all the solacing signs of affection from a beloved child upon whether or no he was pre-

pared to accept a disliked and mistrusted figure as merged into hers.

It is true that the Vicar had offered him his sympathy. At first Grafton had thought that he had misjudged him when he had come to him with a tale of how troubled he had been that Mollie Walter seemed to have been backing up Beatrix in setting herself against his will, how his wife thought the same, and—although he would never have thought of asking her to do so—had of her own accord spoken to Mrs. Walter about it. Grafton had been a little disturbed at finding that the Vicar seemed to know 'all about everything'; but the Vicar had expressed himself so rightly, commending him for the stand he had taken, and the reasons for it, that any doubts he may have come to feel as to whether he had been justified in his opposition to Lassigny's suit, had been greatly lessened. The Vicar thought as he did about it; even rather more strongly. The innocence of girlhood was a most precious thing, and a father who should insist that it should mate with nothing but a corresponding innocence was taking a stand that all men who loved righteousness must thank him for. As an accredited and official lover of righteousness the Vicar perhaps rather overdid his sympathy, which required for expression more frequent visits to the Abbey and a return to a more intimate footing there than he had lately enjoyed. Grafton did not want to be forever discussing the general question of male misdeeds and feminine innocence with a man who appeared from his conversation to have shed all traces of human in-

firmity except that of curiosity. And there was a good deal too much of Mollie Walter brought into it. What had Mollie Walter to do with it, or he with her? Or indeed the Vicar with her, if it came to that? It seemed that he feared the same sort of danger for her that Grafton had so rightly and courageously warded off for Beatrix. Grafton knew what and whom he referred to, and put aside his proferred confidence. He also began to close up to intimate references to Beatrix's innocence, and came to dislike Beatrix's name on the Vicar's lips.

The end of it had been that the Vicar had been returned to his Vicarage, politely but indubitably, with nothing gained but another topic of acrid conversation with his wife.

But there was one other person to whom Grafton was beginning to unburden himself.

CHAPTER XXI

A FINE HUNTING MORNING

The big dining-room of Wilborough Hall, with a table at one end of it as a buffet, was full of people eating and drinking and talking and laughing. As Grafton and Barbara and Young George went in, they saw few there whom they did not know, and among the crowd there were many who could already be counted as friends.

No gathering of this sort could be found in a city, nor in many countries outside England, where the land is loved, and lived on, by those who could centre themselves elsewhere if they chose. To the Graftons, as new-comers, the people gathered here from a radius of some miles were beginning to be known in the actualities of their lives as acquaintances in London never could be known, except those who could be called friends. Each of them represented something recognised and fixed, which gave them an interest and an atmosphere. They belonged here and there, and their belongings coloured them, more perhaps even than their characters or achievements.

Achievement, indeed, was scarcely represented. There were two members of the House of Lords, neither

of whom ever visited that assembly, and a member of the House of Commons, who never spoke there if he could possibly help it. There were a few undistinguished barristers, and some as yet undistinguished soldiers. To the world outside the circle to which these people mostly belonged, scarcely a name represented there would have been familiar; and yet in a similar gathering anywhere in England the names of many of them would have been known, and would have meant something.

What they would have meant, among other things, if worked back to beginnings, would have been the ownership of England. If the people in this room, most of them unimportant if tested by their capacity to achieve power among their fellows by unaided effort, had been taken as a centre, and the circle widened, and widened again by the inclusion of all those related by birth or marriage, it would eventually have covered all but a spot here and there of the map of the United Kingdom, and the great mass of the inhabitants of these islands would have been left outside.

In charging the whole of this particular assembly with a notable absence of achievement, exception must be made for the Bishop of the Diocese, who was there, however, as a visitor, not being in the habit of attending such gatherings of his flock in his pastoral capacity. Even he might not have reached his gaitered eminence if he had not belonged by birth to the sort of people represented here, for, in spite of the democratisation of the Church, the well-born clergyman, if he follows

the lines of promotion and is not noticeably lacking in ability, still has a slight 'pull.'

The lines of promotion, however, are other than they were a generation or two ago. This bishop had begun his work in a large town parish, and had kept to the crowded ways. Hard work and a capacity for organisation are the road to success in the Church to-day. Rich country rectories must be looked at askance until they can be taken as a secondary reward, the higher prizes having been missed. Even when the prizes are gained, the highest of them no longer bring dignified leisure. A bishop is a hard-working official in these latter days, and, if overtaken by the natural desires of advancing years for rest and contemplation, must occasionally cast wistful eyes upon the reward he might have gained if he had run second in the race instead of first.

The Bishop of Meadshire was an uncle by marriage of Mrs. Carruthers, of Surley Park, who had brought him over, with other guests, to enjoy this, to him unwonted, scene. Cheerful and courteous, with a spare figure, an excellent digestion and a presumably untroubled conscience, he was well qualified to gain the fullest amount of benefit from such relaxations as a country house visit, with its usual activities and pastimes, affords.

He was standing near the door with his niece when the Graftons entered the room, and Grafton and Barbara and Young George were immediately introduced to him. This was done with the air of bringing to-

gether particular friends of the introducing party. Each would have heard much of the other, and would meet for the first time not as complete strangers.

The Bishop was, indeed, extremely cordial. A bright smile lit up his handsome and apostolic features, and he showered benignity upon Barbara and Young George when it came to their turn. "Then we've met at last," he said. "I've been hearing such a lot about you. Indeed, I may be said to have heard hardly anything about anybody else, since I've been at Surley."

Ella Carruthers had her hand on Barbara's shoulder. "I'm sure you're not disappointed in my new friends," she said, giving the girl an affectionate squeeze. "This one's the chief of them."

Barbara appeared a trifle awkward, which was not her usual habit. She liked Mrs. Carruthers, as did the whole family. They had all been together constantly during the past few weeks, ever since the returned wanderer had come over to the Abbey to call, and had shown herself a fit person to be taken immediately into their critical and exclusive society. She had triumphantly passed the tests. She was beautiful and gay, laughed at the same sort of jokes as they did, and made them, liked the same sort of books, and saw people in the same sort of light. She was also warm-hearted and impulsive, and her liking for them was expressed with few or no reserves. It had been amply responded to by all except Barbara, who had held off a little, she could not have told why, and would not have admitted to a less degree of acceptance

of their new friend than her sisters. Perhaps Ella Carruthers had divined the slight hesitation, for she had made more of Barbara than of Caroline or Beatrix, but had not yet dissolved it.

As for the rest of them, they were always chanting her virtues and charm. For each of them she had something special. With Caroline she extolled a country existence, and didn't know how she could have kept away from her nice house and her lovely garden for so long. She was quite sincere in this. Caroline would soon have discovered it if she had been pretending. She did love her garden, and worked in it. And she led the right sort of life in her fine house, entertaining many guests, but never boring herself if they dwindled to one or two, nor allowing herself to be crowded out of her chosen pursuits. She read and sewed and played her piano, and was never found idle. Caroline and she were close friends.

Beatrix had made a confidant of her, and had received much sympathy. But she had told her outright that she could not have expected her father to act otherwise than he had, and Beatrix had taken it from her, as she would not have taken it from any one else.

Miss Waterhouse she treated as she was treated by her own beloved charges, with affection and respect disguised as impertinence. She was young enough and witty enough to be able to do so. Miss Waterhouse thought her position somewhat pathetic—a young girl in years, but with so much on her shoulders. She had

come to think it admirable too, the way in which she fulfilled her responsibilities, which never seemed to be a burden on her. Her guardian, who was also her lawyer, advised her constantly and was frequently at Surley, but her bailiff depended on her in minor matters, and she was always accessible to her tenants, and beloved by them.

It was in much the same way that Grafton had come to regard her. In the way she lived her life as mistress of her large house, and of a property which, though it consisted of only half a dozen farms, would have overtaxed the capacity of many women, she was a paragon. And yet she was scarcely older than his own children—might have been his child in point of years—and had all the charm and light-heartedness of her youth. She had something more besides—a wise woman's head, quick to understand and respond. He was so much the companion of his own children that a friend of theirs was usually a friend of his. Many of his daughters' girl friends treated him in much the same way as if he had been Caroline and Beatrix's brother instead of their father. Ella Carruthers did. It was difficult sometimes to imagine that she was a widow and the mistress of a large house, so much did she seem to belong to the family group. In their united intercourse he had not had many opportunities of talking to her alone, and had never so far sought them. But on two or three occasions they had found themselves tête-à-tête for a time, and he had talked to her about what was filling his mind, which was Beatrix and her

love-affair, and particularly her changing attitude towards himself.

She had taken his side warmly, and had given him a sense of pleasure and security in her sympathy. Also of comfort in what had become a considerable trouble to him. She knew how much Beatrix loved him, she said. She had told her so, and in any case she could not be mistaken. But she was going through a difficult time for a girl. He must have patience. Whichever way it turned out she would come back to him. How could she help it, he being what he had been to her all her life?

As to the possibility of its turning out in any way but one, she avowed herself too honest to give him hope, much as she would have liked to do so. Beatrix was in love with the man, and had not changed; nor would she change within the six months allowed her. Whether her lover would come for her again when the time was up was another question. She could tell no more than he. But he must not allow himself to be disappointed if he did. He had accepted him provisionally, and must be prepared to endorse his acceptance. Surely he would get used to the marriage, if it came off! And the mutual absorption of a newly-married couple did not last for ever. She could speak from experience there. She had adored her own guardian, in whose house she had been brought up from infancy. She fancied she must have loved him at least as much as most girls loved their own fathers; yet when she had been engaged to be married, and for a time afterwards,

she had thought very little of him, and she knew now that he had felt it, though he had said nothing. But after a time, when she had wanted him badly, she had found him waiting for her, just the same as ever; and now she loved him more than she had done before.

Grafton was not unimpressed by this frank disclosure, though the not unimportant fact that the lady's husband had proved himself a rank failure in his matrimonial relations had been ignored in her telling of the story. And it would be a dismal business if the full return of his child to him were to depend upon a like failure on the part of the man she should marry. Certainly he didn't want that for her. If she *should* marry the fellow it was to be hoped that she would be happy with him, and he himself would do nothing to come between them. Nevertheless, the reminder that the fervour of love need not be expected to keep up to concert pitch, when the sedative effect of marriage had had time to cool it, did bring him some consolation, into which he did not look too closely. It would be soothing if the dear child were to discover that her old Daddy stood for something, after all, which she could not get even from her husband, and that he would regain his place apart, and be relieved of the hard necessity of taking in and digesting an alien substance in order to get any flavour out of her love for him. He never would and never could get used to the fellow; he felt that now, and told the sympathètic lady so. She replied that one could get used to anything in this life, and in some cases it was one's duty to do so. She was

no mere cushiony receptacle for his grievances. She had a mind of her own, and the slight explorations he had made into it pleased and interested him. He was not so loud in his praises of her as his daughters, but it was plain that he liked to see her at the Abbey, and it was always safe to accept an invitation for him to Surley if he was absent when it was given.

Mrs. Carruthers was not riding that morning. Out of deference to her exalted guest and various others of weight and substance, invited to meet him, she was hunting on wheels. Some of them would view such episodes of the chase as could, with luck, be seen from the seats of a luxurious motor-car, but she was driving his lordship himself in her pony-cart, quite in the old style in vogue before the scent of the fox had begun to dispute its sway in the hunting-field with that of petrol. It was years since the Bishop had come as close as this to one of the delights of his youth, and he showed himself mildly excited by it, and talked to Barbara about hounds and horses in such a way as to earn from her the soubriquet of " a genuine lamb."

He was too important, however, to be allowed more than a short conversation with one of Barbara's age, and was reft from her before she could explore very far into the unknown recesses of a prelatical mind. She was rewarded, however, for the temporary deprivation —she had other opportunities on the following day— by coming in for Ella Carruther's sparkling description of the disturbance caused in the clerical nest of Surley by her uncle's visit.

"When they heard he was really coming," she was saying to Grafton, "they redoubled their efforts. Poor young Denis—who really looks sweet as a curate, though more deliciously solemn than ever—was sent up with a direct proposal. Couldn't I let bygones be bygones for the good of the community? I said I didn't know what the community had to do with it, and I couldn't forgive the way they had behaved. He said they were sorry. I said they had never done or said a thing to show it. We fenced a little, and he went back to them. Would you believe it, they swallowed their pride and sent me a letter. I'll show it you. You never read such a letter. They asked me to dinner at the end of it,—to-night—and perhaps I should be able to bring his lordship. I thanked them for their letter, and refused their invitation—of course politely. I asked Denis to dinner last night, and they let him come, but I think he must have had a struggle for it, because he looked very unhappy. My uncle is going to see poor old Mr. Cooper this afternoon, and, of course, they'll make a dead set at him; but it will be a bedside scene, and that's all they're going to get out of it."

"Aren't you a trifle feline about the poor ladies?" asked Grafton.

"*They* are feline, if you like. Aren't they, Barbara?"

"They're spiteful old cats, if that's what you mean," said Barbara. "Did you ask Lord Salisbury to dinner?"

"No. I have an idea that my uncle wishes to have a rest from the clergy, though it's as much as his place is worth to say so. The darling old thing! He's thoroughly enjoying himself. I believe he would have hunted to-day, if I had pressed a mount upon him."

"Is Denis going to preach at him to-morrow?" asked Grafton.

"Yes, I suppose so. Mr. Mercer offered to do it in the afternoon, but Rhoda and Ethel refused. I got that out of Denis himself, who is too deliciously innocent and simple for words. If it weren't for Rhoda and Ethel I really think I should make love to my uncle to give him the living when poor old Mr. Cooper comes to an end. Perhaps he will in any case. A lot hangs upon Denis's sermon to-morrow."

"I expect Rhoda and Ethel have written it for him," said Barbara.

"Perhaps one of them will dress up and preach," suggested Young George.

Barbara looked at him fondly. "Not very good, Bunting dear," she said. "He does much better than that sometimes, Ella. He's quite a bright lad."

Caroline and Beatrix had no lack of society, seated in their saddles outside. Richard Mansergh, after vainly trying to get them to let him fetch them something to keep out the draught, went off elsewhere, but his place was taken by others. Bertie Pemberton came up with two of his sisters, all three of them conspicuous examples of the decorative value of hard cloth, and it was as if the loud pedal had suddenly been jammed

down on a piano. Bertie himself, however, was not so vociferous as usual, and when his sisters suggested going inside said that he was quite happy where he was. This was on the further side of Beatrix, of whom he had already enquired whether anybody had brought over Mollie Walter. Nobody had, and he said it was a pity on such a day as this, but he hoped they'd have some fun after all. Nora and Kate, however, were not to go unaccompanied to their refreshment. Jimmy Beckley, perched on a tall horse, with an increased air of maturity in consequence, offered to squire them, and they went off with him, engaging him in loud chaff, to which he responded with consummate ease and assurance.

It was evident that Bertie Pemberton had something particular to say to Beatrix. His horse fidgeted and he made tentative efforts to get her to follow him in a walk. But Beatrix's mare was of the lazy sort, quite contented to stand still as long as it should be permitted her, and she refused to put her in motion, though she was not altogether incurious as to what the young man wished to disclose. She thought it probable, however, that he would make his attempt later on, if there should be any period of hanging about the covert side, and under those less conspicuous circumstances she should not refuse to listen to him.

Among the few hardy spirits who had come prepared to follow the hounds on foot was Maurice Bradby. Worthing had driven him over in his dog-cart and after a few cheery words with Caroline and Beatrix had

gone inside. Bradby had not followed him, but as the girls were just then surrounded by a little group of people he had hung about on its skirts, evidently wishing to talk to them, but being too shy to do so.

This young man's diffidence had begun to arouse comment at the Abbey. They all liked him, and had shown him that they did. There were times when he seemed thoroughly at home with them, and showed qualities which endeared him to the active laughter-loving family. Young George frankly adored him, finding in him all he wanted for companionship, and with him he was at his ease, and even took the undisputed lead. But on the other hand Grafton found him hang heavy, on the few occasions when they had to be alone together. He was deferential, not in any way that showed lack of manly spirit, but so as to throw all the burden of conversation on his host. Grafton found it rather tiresome to sit with him alone after dinner. It was only when they were occupied together, in the garden or elsewhere, that Bradby seemed to take up exactly the right attitude towards him.

The girls came between their father and their brother. Barbara had altered her first opinion of him. There was still something of the boy in her; she shared as far as she was permitted in the pursuits of Bradby and Bunting, and all three got on well together. The two other girls found his diffidence something of a brake on the frank friendship they were ready to accord to their companions among young men. Beatrix was most outspoken about it. Of course

he was not, in his upbringing or experience, like other young men whom they had known. In London, perhaps, they would not have wanted to make a particular friend of him. But here in the country he fitted in. Why couldn't he take the place they were ready to accord him, and not be always behaving as if he feared to be in the way?

Caroline was softer. She agreed that his shyness was rather tiresome, but thought it would wear off in time. It was better, after all, to have a young man who did not think too much of himself than one who would always have to be kept in his place. She found his love for nature refreshing and interesting, and something fine and genuine in him that made it worth while to cultivate him, and have patience. Beatrix would say, in answer to this, that she hadn't got enough patience, and doubted whether the results would make it worth while to exercise it. But Beatrix was a little oversharp in these days, and what she said needed not to be taken too seriously.

She saw Maurice Bradby standing at a little distance off, casting shy glances at them as if he wanted to make one of the group around them, but lacked the boldness to introduce himself into it, and felt a spurt of irritation against him. Caroline saw him too, and presently, when the group had thinned, walked her horse to where he was standing. He received her with a grateful smile, and they talked about the day's prospects and his chances of seeing the sport on foot, and hers of a good run.

The people who had been refreshing themselves indoors came out, mounted their horses or took to their carriages, cars and carts, while the huntsman led his bunched and trotting hounds down the drive, and the gay cavalcade followed them to the scene of their sport. The soft grey winter sky breathed mild moisture, the tree twigs were purple against it, and seemed already to be giving promise of spring, though the year was only just on the turn. No one there would have exchanged this mood of England's much abused climate for the flowery deceptions of the South, or even for the frosty sparkle of Alpine winters. It was a fine hunting morning, and they were all out to enjoy themselves, in the way that their forbears had enjoyed themselves for generations.

CHAPTER XXII

ANOTHER AFFAIR

Bertie Pemberton stuck close by Beatrix's side as they trotted easily with the crowd up to the wood which was first to be drawn.

"They won't find anything here," he said; "they never do. They'll draw Beeching Copse next. Let's go off there, shall we? Lots of others will."

In her ignorance and his assurance of what was likely to happen, she allowed herself to follow his lead. The 'lots of others' proved to be those of the runners who were knowing enough to run risks so as to spare themselves, and a few experienced horsemen who shared Bertie's opinion; but there were enough of them to make the move not too conspicuous. Bertie found the occasion he wanted, and made use of it at once.

"I say, I know you're a pal of Mollie Walter's," he said. "Is there any chance for me?"

Beatrix was rather taken aback by this directness, having anticipated nothing more than veiled enquiries from which she would gain some amusement and interest in divining exactly how far he had gone upon the road which she thought Mollie was also traversing.

"Why do you ask me that?" she said, after a slight pause. "Why don't you ask her?"

"Well, because I don't want to make a fool of myself. I believe she likes me, but I don't know."

"Do you want me to find out for you, then?" she asked, after another pause.

"I thought you'd give me a tip," he said. "I know you're a pal of hers. I suppose she talks about things to you."

"Of course she talks about things to me."

"Yes? Well!"

She kept silence.

"Is it any good?" he asked again.

"How should I know?" asked Beatrix. "You don't suppose she's confided in me that she's dying for love of you!"

He turned to look at her. Her pretty face was pink, and a trifle scornful. "Oh, I say!" he exclaimed. "What have I said to put you in a bait?"

"Are *you* in love with her?" asked Beatrix.

"I should think you could see that, can't you?" he said, with a slight droop. "I don't know that I've taken particular pains to hide it."

"Well then, why don't you tell her so? It's the usual thing to do, isn't it?"

He laughed. "Which brings us back to where we were before," he said.

"I'm not going to give you any encouragement," said Beatrix. "If you really love her, and don't ask her without wanting to know beforehand what she'll say—well, of course, you *can't* really love her."

Somewhat to her surprise, and a little to her dismay,

he seemed to be considering this. "Well, I don't want to make a mistake," he said. "I'll tell you how it is. I never seem to get beyond a certain point with her. I know this, that if she'd just give me a little something, I should be head over ears. Then I shouldn't want to ask you or anybody. I should go straight in. That's how it is."

Beatrix was interested in this disclosure. It threw a light upon the mysterious nature of man's love, as inflammable material which needs a spark to set it ablaze. In a rapid review of her own case she saw exactly where she had provided the spark, and the hint of a question came to her, which there was no time to examine into, as to which of the two really comes to a decision first, the man or the woman.

She would not, however, admit to him that it was to be expected of a girl that she should indicate the answer she would give to a question before it had been asked. She also wanted to find out if there was any feeling in his mind that he would not be doing well for himself and his family if he should marry Mollie. On her behalf she was prepared to resent such an idea, and to tell him quite frankly what she thought about it.

"Don't you think she's worth taking a little risk about?" she asked.

"She's worth anything," he said simply, and she liked him for the speech, but stuck to her exploratory purpose.

"If you've made it so plain that you want her," she

said, "I suppose your people know about it. What do they say?"

"Say? They don't say anything. I've paid attentions to young women before, you know. It's supposed to be rather a habit of mine."

She liked this speech much less. "Perhaps that's why Mollie doesn't accept them with the gratitude you seem to expect of her," she said. "I don't like your way of talking about her."

"Talking about her? What do you mean? I've said nothing about her at all, except that I think she's the sweetest thing in the world. At least I haven't said that, but I've implied it, haven't I? Anyhow, that's what I do think."

"Haven't you thought that about the others you're so proud of having paid attention to?"

"I didn't say I was proud of it. How you do take a fellow up. Yes, perhaps I have thought it once or twice. I don't want to make myself out what I'm not."

He was dead honest, she thought, but still wasn't quite sure that he was worthy of her dear Mollie; or even that he was enough in love with her to make it desirable that he should marry her. But Beatrix, innocent and childish as she was in many ways, had yet seen too much of the world not to have her ideas touched by the worldly aspects of marriage, for others, at least, if not for herself. Bertie Pemberton would be a very good 'match' for Mollie; and she knew already that Mollie 'liked' him, though she had no intention of telling him so.

"Will your people like your marrying Mollie—if you do?" she asked.

"Like it! Of course they'll like it. They're devilish fond of her, the whole lot of them. Why shouldn't they like it?"

She didn't answer, and he repeated the question, "Why shouldn't they like it?"

"I thought perhaps they might want you to marry somebody with money, or something of that sort," she said, forced to answer, but feeling as if she had fixed herself with the unworthy ideas she had sought to find in him.

He added to her confusion by saying: "I shouldn't have thought that sort of thing would have come into *your* head. I suppose what you really mean is that there'd be an idea of my marrying out of my beat, so to speak, if I took Mollie."

"If you *took* Mollie!" she echoed, angry with herself and therefore more angry with him. "What a way to talk! I think Mollie's far too good for you. Too good in every way, and I mean that. It's only that I know how people of your sort *do* look at things—and because she lives in a little cottage and you in a—Oh, you make me angry."

He laughed at her. There was no doubt about his easy temper. "Look here," he said. "Let's get it straight. I'm not a snob, and my people aren't snobs. As for money—well, I suppose it's always useful, if it's there; but if it isn't—well, it's going to be all the more my show. There'll be enough to get along on.

If I could have the luck to get that girl for my own, I should settle down here, and look after the place, and be as happy as a king. The old governor would like that, and so would the girls. And they'd all make a lot of her. Everybody about here who knows her likes her, and I should be as proud as Punch of her. You know what she's like yourself. There's nobody to beat her. She's a bit shy now, because she hasn't been about as much as people like you have; but I like her all the better for that. She's like something—I hope you won't laugh at me—it's like finding a jewel where you didn't expect it. She's never been touched—well, I suppose I mean she's unspotted by the world, as they read out in church the other day. I thought to myself, Yes, that's Mollie. She isn't like other girls one may have taken a fancy to at some time or another."

Beatrix liked him again now. They had reached the copse where the next draw would be made, and were standing in a corner at its edge. She stole a glance at him sitting easily on his tall horse and found him a proper sort of man, in spite of his lack of the finer qualities. Perhaps he did not lack them so much as his very ordinary speech and behaviour had seemed to indicate. She had pictured him taking a fancy to Mollie, and willing to gratify it in passing over the obvious differences between his situation in the world and hers. But his last speech had shown him to have found an added attraction in her not having been brought up in his world, and it did him credit, for it meant to him

something good and quiet towards which his thoughts were turned, and not at all the unsuitability which many men of his sort would have seen in it.

There was a look on his ordinary, rather unmeaning face which touched Beatrix. "I like you for saying that," she said frankly. "It's what anybody who can see things ought to think about darling Mollie. I'm sorry I said just now that you weren't really good enough for her."

He looked up and laughed again, the gravity passing from his face. "Well, it *was* rather rough," he said, "though it's what I feel myself, you know. Makes you ashamed of having knocked about—you know what I mean. Or perhaps you don't. But men aren't as good as girls. But when you fall in love with a girl like Mollie—well, you want to chuck it all, and make yourself something different—more suitable, if you know what I mean. That's the way it takes you; or ought to when you're really in love with somebody who's worth it."

She liked him better every moment. A dim sense of realities came to her, together with the faintest breath of discomfort, as her own case, always present with her while she was discussing that of another, presented itself from this angle. She had been very scornful of Bertie's frank admission that there had been others before Mollie. But weren't there always others, with men? If a true love wiped them out, and made the man wish he had brought his first love to the girl, as he so much revered her for bringing hers to him, then

the past should be forgiven him; he was washed clean of it. It was the New Birth in the religion of Love. Mollie represented purity and innocence to this ordinary unreflective young man, and something good in him went out to meet it, and sloughed off the unworthiness in him. His chance of regeneration had been given him.

"If you feel like that about her," she said, "I don't know what you meant when you said she hadn't given you enough encouragement to make you take the risk with her."

His face took on its graver look again. "I don't know that I quite know what I meant myself," he said. "I suppose—in a way—it's two sorts of love. At least, one is mixed up with the other. Oh, I don't know. I can't explain things like that."

But Beatrix, without experience to guide her, but with her keen feminine sense for the bases of things, had a glimmering. The lighter love, which was all this young man had known hitherto, would need response to set it aflame. He was tangled in his own past. The finer love that had come to him was shrinking and fearful, set its object on a pedestal to which it hardly dared to raise its eyes. It was this sort of love that raised a man above himself and above his past. Again a question insinuated itself into her mind. Had it been given in her own case? But again there was no time to answer it.

There was no time, indeed, for more conversation. A hulloa and a bustle at the further edge

of the wood from which they had come showed it to have contained a prize after all. The stream set that way, and they followed it with the hope of making up for the ground they had lost.

For a time they galloped together, and then there came a fence which Bertie took easily enough, but which to Beatrix was somewhat of an ordeal. She went at it, but her mare, having her own ideas as to how much should be asked of her, refused; and at the beginning of the day, with her blood not yet warmed, Beatrix did not put her at it again. There was a gate a few yards off which had already been opened, and she went through it with others. In the meantime Bertie, to whom it had not occurred that she would not take a fence that any of his sisters would have larked over without thinking about it, had got on well ahead of her, and she did not see him again.

But although their conversation had been cut short, all, probably, had been said that he could have expected to be said. Beatrix thought that there was little doubt now of his proposing to Mollie, and perhaps as soon as he should find an opportunity.

Beatrix, of all three of the girls, was the least interested in hunting. When she realised that the day had opened with a good straight run, and that her bad start had left her hopelessly behind, she gave it up, and was quite content to do so. A little piece of original thinking on her part had led her to take a different line from that followed by most of those who had started late with her, but it had not given her the ad-

vantage she had hoped from it. Presently she found herself quite alone, in a country of wide grass fields and willow-bordered brooks which was actually the pick of the South Meadshire country, if only the fox had been accommodating enough to take to it.

Recognising, after a time, that she was hopelessly lost, and being even without the country lore that would have given her direction by the softly blowing west wind, she gave it up with a laugh and decided to return slowly home. She would anyhow have had a nice long ride, and the feminine spirit in her turned gratefully towards a cosy afternoon indoors with a book, which would be none the less pleasant because it had hardly been earned.

She followed tracks across the fields until she came to a lane and then to a road, followed that till she found crossroads and a signpost, and then discovered that she was going in the opposite direction to that of Abington. So she turned back about a mile, and going a little farther found herself in familiar country and reached home in time for a bath before luncheon.

That was Beatrix's day with the hounds, but she had plenty to think about as she walked and trotted along the quiet lanes.

She felt rather soft with regard to Bertie and Mollie. He had shown himself in a light that touched her, and the conviction, which at one period of their conversation she had quite sincerely expressed to him, that he was not nearly good enough for her chosen friend, she found herself to have relinquished. As the young man

with some reputation for love-making, who had seemed to be uncertain whether he would or he wouldn't, he had certainly not been good enough, nor on that side of him would he ever be good enough. But there had been something revealed that went a good deal deeper than that. Beatrix thought that his love for Mollie was after all of the right sort, and was honouring to her friend. She also thought that she herself might perhaps do something to further it.

As for Mollie, she had found herself somewhat impressed by the young man's statement that she had given him little encouragement. She had seen for herself, watching the pair of them when they had been together, how she had been invited to it. Here again her own experience that had been so sweet to her came in. The man shows himself attracted. He makes little appeals and advances. An aura begins to form round him; he is not as other men. But the girl shrinks instinctively from those advances at first, holding her maiden stronghold. Then, as instinctively, she begins to invite them, and greatly daring makes some fluttering return, to be followed perhaps by a more determined closing up. The round repeats itself, and she is led always further along the path that she half fears to tread, until at last she is taken by storm, and then treads it with no fear at all, but with complete capitulation and high joy.

So it had been with her, and she thought that it should have been so with Mollie, until the tiresome figure of the Vicar, spoiling the delicate poise with his

crude accusations, presented itself to her. It was that that had made Mollie so careful that she had shut herself off in irresponsiveness, wary and intended, instead of following the fresh pure impulses of her girlhood. She was sure of it, and half wished she had said as much to Bertie, but on consideration was glad that she hadn't. He would have been very angry, and awkwardness might have come of it, for those who were forced to live in proximity to this official upholder of righteousness. He would be sufficiently confounded when what he had shown himself so eager to spoil in the making should result in happiness and accord. If Beatrix, in her loyalty towards youth as against interfering middle-age, also looked forward with pleasure to exhibitions of annoyance at the defeat that was coming to him, she may perhaps be forgiven.

It may be supposed, however, that during that long slow ride home her thoughts were more taken up with her own affair than with that of her friends, which indeed seemed in train to be happily settled in a way that hers was not.

For the first time in all these months, she examined it from a standpoint a little outside herself. She did not know that she was enabled to do this by the fact that her devotion to Lassigny's memory had begun to loosen its hold on her. Her time of love-making had been so short, and her knowledge of her lover so slight, that it was now the memory to which she clung, and was obliged to cling if her love was not to die down altogether. None of this, however, would she have ad-

mitted. She had given her love, and in her own view of it she had given it for life.

What she found herself able to examine, in the light of Bertie Pemberton's revelation of himself, was the figure of her own lover, not altogether deprived of the halo with which she had crowned it, but for the first time somewhat as others might see it, and especially her father.

He distrusted Lassigny. Why? She had never admitted the question before, and only did so now on the first breath of discomfort that blew chill on her own heart. Those two sorts of love of which Mollie's lover had dimly seen his own to be compounded—had they both been offered to her? There had been no such shrinking on Lassigny's part as the more ordinary young man had confessed to. He had wooed her boldly, irresistibly, with the sure confidence of a man who knows his power, and what he may expect to get for himself from it. He had desired her, and she had fallen a willing captive to him. She knew that he had found her very sweet, and he had laid at her feet so much that she had never questioned his having laid all. All would have included his own man's past, the full tide of the years and experiences of youth, spent lavishly while she had been a little child, and beginning now to poise its wings for departure. It was the careless waste of youth and of love that Mollie's lover had felt to have been disloyalty to the finer love that had come to him, and turned him from his loud self-confidence to diffidence and doubt. There had been no

self-abasement of that sort in Beatrix's lover. He had claimed her triumphantly, as he had claimed and enjoyed other loves. She was one of a series, different from the others insomuch as the time had come for him to settle down, as the phrase went, and it was more agreeable to make a start at that postponed process with love as part of the propulsion than without it. It was not even certain that she would be the last of the series. In her father's view it was almost certain that she wouldn't.

She did not see all of this, by any means, as she rode reflectively homewards. Her knowledge and experience included perhaps a very small part of it as conscious reflection, and there was no ordered sequence of thought or discovery in the workings of her girl's mind. Some progression, however, there was, in little spurts of feeling and enlightenment. She was more doubtful of her lover, more doubtful of the strength of her own attachment to him, more inclined to return to her loving allegiance to her father, whatever the future should hold for her.

This last impulse of affection was the most significant outcome of all her aroused sensibilities. She would not at any time have acknowledged that he had been right and she had been wrong. But she felt the channel of her love for him cleared of obstruction. It flowed towards him. It would be good to give it expression, and gain in return the old happy signs of his tenderness and devotion towards her. She wanted to see him at once, and behave to him as his spoilt loving child,

and rather hoped that the fortunes of the chase would bring him home before the rest, so that she might have a cosy companionable little time with him alone.

In the afternoon, as the short winter day began to draw in, having read and lightly slept, her young blood roused her to activity again. She would go and see Mollie, and persuade her to come back to tea with her, so that they could talk confidentially together. Or if she had to stay to tea at Stone Cottage, because of Mrs. Walter, perhaps Mollie would come back with her afterwards.

She put on her coat and hat, and went out as the dusk was falling over the quiet spaces of the park. As she neared the gates she heard the trot of a horse on the road outside, and wondered if it was her father who was coming home. She had forgotten her wish that he would do so, as it had seemed so little likely of fulfilment, but made up her mind to go back with him if it should happily be he.

It was a man, who passed the gates at a sharp trot, not turning his head to look inside them. The light was not too far gone for her to recognise, with a start of surprise, the horsemanlike figure of Bertie Pemberton, whom she had imagined many miles away. The hunt had set directly away from Abington, and was not likely to have worked back so far in this direction. Nor could Abington conceivably be on Bertie's homeward road, even supposing him so far to have departed from his usual habits as to have taken it before the end of the day. What was he doing here?

She thought she knew, and walked on down the road to the village at a slightly faster pace, with a keen sense of pleasure and excitement at her breast. She saw him come out of the stable of the inn, on foot, and walk up the village street at the head of which stood Stone Cottage, at a pace faster than her own.

Then she turned and went back, smiling to herself, but a little melancholy too. She was not so happy as Mollie was likely to be in a very short time.

CHAPTER XXIII

BERTIE AND MOLLIE

The Vicar and Mrs. Mercer were drinking tea with Mrs. Walter and Mollie. There had been a revival of late of the old intercourse between the Vicarage and Stone Cottage. Mollie had been very careful. After that conversation with her mother recorded a few chapters back, she had resolutely made up her mind that no call from outside should lure her away from her home whenever her mother would be likely to want her. With her generous young mind afire with tenderness and gratitude for all the love that had been given to her, for the years of hard and anxious toil that had gone to the making of this little home, in which at last she could make some return for her mother's devotion, she had set herself to put her above everything, and had never flinched from sacrificing her youthful desires to that end, while taking the utmost pains to hide the fact that there was any sacrifice at all. She had had her reward in the knowledge that her mother was happier than she had ever been since her widowhood, with an increased confidence in the security she had worked so hard to gain, and even some improvement in health. The poor woman, crushed more by the hard weight of difficult years than by any definite ailment, had seen

her hold on her child loosening, and the friendship that had been so much to her becoming a source of strife and worry instead of refreshment. It had been easier to suffer under the thought of what should be coming to her than to make headway against it. She had no vital force left for further struggle, and to rise and take up the little duties of her day had often been too much for her while she had been under the weight of her fear. That fear was now removed, and a sense of safety and contentment had taken its place. She had been more active and capable during this early winter than at any such period since she had gained her freedom.

Part of Mollie's deeply considered duty had been to recreate the intimacy with the Vicar and Mrs. Mercer, and by this time there had come to be no doubt that they occupied first place again in her attentions. Even Beatrix had had to give way to them, but had found Mollie so keenly delighted in her society when she did enjoy it, that, divining something of what was behind it all, she had made no difficulties, except to chaff her occasionally about her renewed devotion to Lord Salisbury.

Mollie never let fall a hint of the aversion she had conceived for the man, which seemed to have come to her suddenly, and for no reason that she wanted to examine. Some change in her attitude towards him he must have felt, for he showed slight resentments and caprices in his towards her; but Mrs. Mercer exulted openly in the return of her allegiance, and if he was not satisfied that it had extended to himself he had no grounds on

which to express complaint. There was no doubt, at least, that Mollie was more at the disposal of himself and his wife than she had been at any time since the Graftons had come to the Abbey, and he put it down as the result of his wife's visit to Mrs. Walter, which he had instigated if not actually directed. So he accepted the renewal of intimacy with not too bad a face, and neither Mrs. Walter nor Mrs. Mercer conceived it to be less complete between all of them than it had been before.

The Vicar had a grievance on this winter afternoon, which he was exploiting over the tea-table.

"The least that could be expected," he was saying, "when the Bishop of the Diocese comes among us is that the clergy of the neighbourhood should be asked to meet him in a friendly way. Mrs. Carruthers gives a great deal of hospitality where it suits her, and I hear that the whole Grafton family has been invited to dinner at Surley Park to-morrow, as of course was to be expected. They have made a dead set at the lady and she at them, and I suppose none of her parties would be complete without a Grafton to grace it, though it's difficult to see what pleasure she can expect the Bishop to take in meeting a young girl like Barbara, or a mere child like the boy."

"Oh, but elderly men do like to have young things about them, Albert," said Mrs. Mercer; "and as this is a purely private family party I dare say Mrs. Carruthers thought that his lordship would prefer to meet lay people rather than the clergy."

The Vicar's mouth shut down, as it always did in company when his wife made a speech of that sort. She had been a good wife to him—that he would have been the first to admit—but he never *could* get her to curb her tongue, which, as he was accustomed to say, was apt to run away with her; although he had tried hard, and even prayed about it, as he had once told her.

"Personally," he said stiffly, "I am unable to draw this distinction between lay people and clergy, except where the affairs of the church are concerned, and I must say it strikes me as odd that the wife of a priest should wish to do so. In ordinary social intercourse I should have said that a well-educated clergyman, who happened also to be a man of the world, was about the best company that could be found anywhere. His thoughts are apt to be on a higher plane than those of other men, but that need not prevent him shining in the lighter phases of conversation. I have heard better, and funnier, stories told by clergymen over the dinner-table than by any other class of human beings, though never, I am thankful to say, a gross one."

"Oh, yes, dear," said Mrs. Mercer soothingly. "I like funny stories with a clerical flavour the best of all myself. Do tell Mrs. Walter that one about the Bishop who asked the man who came to see him to take two chairs."

"As you have already anticipated the point of the story," said the Vicar, not mollified, "I think I should prefer to save it for another occasion. I was over at

Surley Rectory yesterday calling on poor old Mr. Cooper. You have never met him, I think, Mrs. Walter."

"No," she said. "He has been more or less laid up ever since we came here."

"I am afraid he will never get about again. He seems to me to be on his last legs, if I may so express myself."

No objection being made to his doing so, he went on. "He has done good work in his time. He is past it now, poor old man, but in years gone by he was an example to all—full of energy and good works. I have been told that before he came to Surley, and held a small living somewhere in the Midlands, he did not rest until he had raised the endowment by a hundred pounds a year. That means hard unremitting work, in these days when the laity is apt to keep its purse closed against the claims of the church. I always like to give credit where credit is due, and I must say for old Mr. Cooper that he has deserved well of his generation."

"It is nice to think of his ending his days in peace in that beautiful place," said Mrs. Walter. "When Mollie and I went to call there in the summer I thought I had never seen a prettier house and garden of its size.

"I wish we could have the luck to get the living when old Mr. Cooper does go," said Mrs. Mercer artlessly. "I don't want the old gentleman to die yet awhile, naturally, but he can't be expected to hold out very much longer; he is eighty-four and getting weaker every day. *Somebody* must be appointed after him,

and I think myself it ought to be an incumbent of the diocese who has borne the heat and burden of the day in a poorly endowed living."

She was only repeating her husband's oft-spoken words, being ready to take his view in all matters, and using his methods of expression as being more suitable than her own. But he was not pleased with the implied compliment. "I wish you wouldn't talk in that way, Gertrude," he said, in an annoyed voice. "Before such friends as Mrs. Walter and Mollie it may do no harm, but if such a thing were said outside it would look as if I had given rise to the wish myself, which is the last thing I should like to be said. If it so befalls me I shall be content to go on working here where Providence has placed me till the end of the chapter, with no other reward but the approval of my own conscience, and perhaps the knowledge that some few people are the better and worthier for the work I have spent a great part of my life in doing amongst them. At the same time I should not refuse to take such a reward as Surley would be if it were offered to me freely, and it were understood that it *was* a reward for work honestly done through a considerable period of years. I would not take it under any other conditions, and as for doing anything to solicit it, it would be to contradict everything that I have always stood for."

"Oh, yes, dear," said Mrs. Mercer. "But it wouldn't have done any harm just to have met the Bishop in a friendly way at Surley itself. It might have sort of connected you with the place in his mind.

I wish we had been able to keep friends with Mrs. Carruthers, or that Rhoda and Ethel had accepted your offer to preach to-morrow afternoon."

Really, although a devoted helpmate, both in purse and person, this woman was a trial. His face darkened so at her speech that Mrs. Walter struck in hurriedly so as to draw the lightning from the tactless speaker. "The Miss Coopers were hoping the last time they were over here that their brother might be appointed to succeed their father," was her not very sedative effort.

But the lightning was drawn. The lowered brows were bent upon her. "I think it is quite extraordinary," said the Vicar, "that those girls should give themselves away as they do. Really, in these matters there are decencies to be observed. A generation or two ago, perhaps, it was not considered wrong to look upon an incumbency as merely providing an income and a house, just as any secular post might. You get it in the works of Anthony Trollope, a tedious long-winded writer, but valuable as giving a picture of his time. But with the growth of true religion and a more self-devoted spirit on the part of the clergy it is almost approaching the sin of simony to talk about an incumbency in the way those girls do so freely."

"They only said that their brother was very much liked by everybody in the parish," said Mollie, who had seen her mother wince at the attack. "They said if the Bishop knew how suitable he really was, he might look over his youth, and appoint him."

The brows were turned upon Mollie, who was given to understand that such matters as these were beyond her understanding, and that no Bishop who valued his reputation could afford to make such an appointment.

Mollie sat silent under the lecture, thinking of other things. It was enough for her that it was not addressed directly to her mother. Something in her attitude, that may have betrayed the complete indifference towards his views which she had thought her submissively downcast eyes were hiding, must have stung him, for his tone hardened against her, and when he had finished with the question of Surley Rectory, his next speech seemed directed at her, with an intention none of the kindest.

"I'm told that Mrs. Carruthers was seen driving the Bishop over to the meet at Grays this morning," he said. "Of course there would be one or two people there whom he might be glad to meet, but he will have a queer idea of our part of the world if he takes it from people like those noisy Pembertons."

Mollie could not prevent a deep blush spreading over her face at this sudden unexpected introduction of the name. She knew that he must notice it, and blushed all the deeper. How she hated him at that moment, and how she blessed his little wife for jumping in with her "Oh, Albert! Not vulgar, only noisy. And it's all good nature and high spirits. You said so yourself after we had dined there in the summer."

"I think we had better not discuss our neighbours," said Mrs. Walter, almost quivering at her own daring.

"The Pembertons have shown themselves very kind and friendly towards us, and personally I like them all."

"So do I," said Mollie, rallying to her mother's side. "Especially the girls. I think they're as kind as any girls I've ever met."

The temper of the official upholder of righteousness was of the kind described by children's nurses as nasty. Otherwise he would hardly have fixed a baleful eye upon Mollie, and said: "Are you sure it's the girls you like best?"

It was at that moment that Bertie Pemberton was announced, his heralding ring at the bell having passed unnoticed.

He told Mollie afterwards that he had noticed nothing odd, having been much worked up in spirit himself, and being also taken aback at finding the room full of outsiders, as he expressed it, instead of only Mollie and her mother.

Mrs. Walter, under the combined stress of the Vicar's speech and Bertie's appearance, was near collapse. When she had shaken hands with him she leant back in her chair with a face so white that Mollie cried out in alarm, and going to her was saved from the almost unbearable confusion that would otherwise have been hers. Mrs. Walter rallied herself, smiled and said there was nothing the matter with her but a sudden faintness which had passed off. She wanted to control the situation, and made the strongest possible mental call upon herself to do so. But her strength

was not equal to the task, and, although she protested, she had to allow herself to be led from the room by Mollie and Mrs. Mercer. She was able, however, to shake hands with Bertie and tell him that Mollie should be down in a minute to give him his tea.

He and the Vicar were left alone. The young man was greatly concerned at Mrs. Walter's sudden attack, which, however, he did not connect with his own arrival, and gave vent to many expressions of concern, of the nature of "Oh, I say!" "It's too bad, you know." "Poor lady! She did look bad, and no mistake!"

The Vicar, actually responsible for Mrs. Walter's collapse, and knowing it, yet felt his anger rising hot and uncontrollable against the intruder. His simple expressions of concern irritated him beyond bearing. He had just enough hold over himself not to break out, but said, in his most Oxford of voices: "Don't you think, sir, that as there's trouble in the house you would be better out of it?"

Bertie paused in his perambulation of the little room, and stared at him. Hostility was plainly to be seen in the way in which he met the look, and he said further: "In any case Mrs. Walter won't be able to come down, and my wife and I will have to be going in a few minutes. You can hardly expect Miss Walter to come and sit and talk alone with you while her mother is ill upstairs."

The Vicar's indefensible attack upon Mollie for her

indelicacy in making friends with a young man not acceptable to himself had been hidden from Bertie, but some hint of his attitude had presented itself to him, perhaps by way of his sisters. He had given it no attention, esteeming it of no importance what a man so outside his own beat should be thinking of him. But here he was faced unmistakably with strong and unfriendly opposition, and it had to be met.

Bertie had been at Oxford himself, but had not acquired the 'manner,' whether as a weapon of claimed superiority or of offence. He said, quite directly, "What has it got to do with you whether I go or stay? You heard what Mrs. Walter said?"

"It has this to do with me, sir," said the Vicar, beginning to lose hold over himself, and exhibiting through his habitually clipped speech traces of a long since sacrificed Cockney accent, "that I am the man to whom these ladies look for help and advice in their unprotected lives. I'm not going to see them at the mercy of any young gentleman who pushes himself in, it's plain enough to see why, and gets them talked about."

"Gets who talked about and by who?" asked Bertie, innocent of grammatical niceties, but temperamentally quick to seize a salient point.

His firm attitude and direct gaze, slightly contemptuous, and showing him completely master of himself in face of a temper roused to boiling-point, added fuel to keep that temper boiling, though it was

accompanied now with trembling of voice and hands, as weakness showed itself to be at its source, and no justified strength of passion.

"Your attentions to Miss Walter have been remarked upon by everybody, sir," continued the furious man. "They are dishonouring to her, and are not wanted, sir. My advice to you is to keep away from the young lady, and not get her talked about. It does her no good to have her name connected with yours. And I won't have her persecuted. *I* won't have it, I say. Do you hear that?"

"Oh, I hear it all right," said Bertie. "They'll hear it upstairs too if you can't put the curb on yourself a bit. What I ask you is what you've got to do with it. You heard what Mrs. Walter said. That's enough for me, and it'll have to be enough for you. All the rest is pure impudence, and I'm going to take no notice of it."

He sat down in a low chair, with his legs stretched out in front of him. This attitude was owing to the tightness of his buckskins at the knee, but it appeared to the Vicar as a deliberate and insulting expression of contempt.

"How dare you behave like that to me, sir?" he cried. "Are you aware that I am a minister of religion?"

"You don't behave much like one," returned Bertie. "I think you've gone off your head. Anyhow, I'm not going to carry on a brawl with you in somebody else's house. I shall be quite ready to come and have it out

with you whenever you like when I leave here—in your vestry, if you like."

"Your manners and speech are detestable, sir," said the Vicar. "You're not fit to come into the house of ladies like these, and if you don't leave it at once—I shall—I shall——"

"You'll what?" asked Bertie. "Put me out? I don't think you could. What I should suggest is that you clear out yourself. You're not in a fit state to be in a lady's drawing-room."

His own anger was rising every moment, but in spite of some deficiencies in brain power he had fairly sound control over the brains he did possess, and they told him that, with two angry men confronted, the one who shows his anger least has an unspeakable advantage over the other.

He was not proof, however, against the next speech hurled at him.

"You are compromising Miss Walter by coming here. If you don't leave off persecuting that young lady with your odious and unwelcome attentions, I shall tell her so plainly, and leave it to her to choose between you and me."

Bertie sprang up. "That's too much," he said, his hands clenched and his eyes blazing. "How dare you talk about my compromising her? And choose between me and you! What the devil do you mean by that?"

The Vicar would have found it hard to explain a speech goaded by his furious annoyance, and what lay

behind it. But he was spared the trouble. Mollie came into the room, to see the two men facing one another as if they would be at fisticuffs the next moment. She and Mrs. Mercer coming downstairs had heard the raised voices, and Mrs. Mercer, frightened, had incontinently fled. She had heard such tones from her lord and master before, and knew that she, unfortunately, could do nothing to calm them. Mollie hardly noticed her flustered apology for flight, but without a moment's hesitation went into the room and shut the door behind her.

Bertie was himself in a moment. This was to be his mate; he knew it for certain at that instant, by the way she held her head and looked directly at him as she came into the room. The sudden joy of her presence made the red-faced spluttering man in front of him of no account, and anger against him not worth holding. Only she must be guarded against annoyance, of all sorts and for ever.

He took a step towards her and asked after her mother. If the Vicar had been master enough of himself to be able to take the same natural line, the situation could have been retrieved and he have got out of it with some remains of dignity. It was his only chance, and he failed to take it.

"Mollie," he said, in the dictatorial voice that he habitually used towards those whom he conceived to owe him deference, and had used not infrequently to her in the days when he had represented protective authority to her, "I have told this young man that it

isn't fitting that he should be alone here with you, while your mother is ill. She will want you. Besides that, he has acted with gross rudeness towards me. Will you please tell him to go? and I will speak to you afterwards."

Bertie gave her no time to reply. He laughed at the absurd threat with which the speech had ended, and said: "Mr. Mercer seems to think he has some sort of authority over you, Mollie. It's what I came here to ask you for myself. If you'll give it me, my dear, I'll ask him to go, and it will be me that will speak to you afterwards."

It was one of the queerest proposals that a girl had ever had, but confidence had come to him, and the assurance that she was his already. The bliss of capitulation might be postponed for a time. The important thing for the moment was to show the Vicar how matters stood, and would continue to stand, and to get rid of him once and for all.

Mollie answered to his sudden impulse as a boat answers at once to its helm. "Yes," she said simply. "I'll do what you want. Mr. Mercer, I think you have been making mistakes. I'll ask you to leave us now."

She had moved to Bertie's side. He put his hand on her shoulder, and they stood there together facing the astonished Vicar. Something fixed and sure in their conjunction penetrated the noxious mists of his mind, and he saw that he had made one hideous mistake after another. Shame overtook him, and he made

one last effort to catch at the vanishing skirts of his dignity.

"Oh, if it's like that," he said with a gulp, "I should like to be the first to congratulate you."

He held out his hand. Neither of them made any motion to take it, but stood there together looking at him until he had turned and left the room.

Then at last they were alone together.

CHAPTER XXIV

SUNDAY

Grafton got up on Sunday morning and carried his cup of tea along the corridor towards Caroline's room, but met the girls' maid who told him that Miss Beatrix wanted him to go and see her.

He felt a little glow of pleasure at the message. The evening before Beatrix had been very gay and loving with him. They had spent a family evening, talking over the events of the day, and playing a rubber of bridge, which had not been succeeded by another because their talk had so amused them. There had been no shadow of the trouble that had of late overcast their happy family intimacy. Lassigny was as far removed from them in spirit as he was in body. Beatrix had been her old-time self, and in high untroubled spirits, which kept them all going, as she most of all of them could do if she were in one of her merry extravagant moods. She had said "Good-night, my darling old Daddy," with her arm thrown round his neck, when they had parted at a comparatively early hour, owing to the fatigues of the day. She had not bid him good-night like that for months past, though there had been times when her attitude almost of hostility towards him had relaxed. But for the closing down again that had followed those relaxations he

might have comforted himself with the reflection that the trouble between them was over. But he had become wary. Her exhibition of affection had sent him to bed happy, but on rising in the morning he had set out for Caroline's room and not for hers. He had jibbed at the thought of that photograph of Lassigny, propped for her opening eye.

The summons, however, seemed to show that the respite had not yet run its course, and he went to her gladly.

She was sitting up in bed with a letter in her hand. Her tea-tray was on the table by her side, and Lassigny's photograph was not. But perhaps she had put it under her pillow. She looked a very child, in her blue silk pyjamas, with her pretty fair hair tumbling over her shoulders.

"Such an excitement, Dad," she said, holding up the letter. "I have sent for the others, but I wanted to tell you first. It's Mollie."

The momentary alarm he had felt as to what a letter that brought excitement to Beatrix could portend was dispersed.

"Mollie and Bertie Pemberton," she said by way of further elucidation as he kissed her.

"Oh, they've fixed it up, have they?" he said as he took the letter and sat on the bed to read it. Caroline and Barbara came in as he was doing so. Young George, who had also received a summons, was too deep in the realms of sleep to obey it.

The letter ran:

"Darling B,—

"I am so happy. Bertie came here this afternoon, and we are engaged. I should have come to tell you all about it but Mother isn't well, and I can't leave her. He is coming here to-morrow morning and we should both like to come and see you all after church time. So we will if Mother is well enough for me to leave her.

"Ever your loving

"MOLLIE."

There was a chatter of delight mixed with some surprise, and then Beatrix told them, which she had not done before, of Bertie's preparatory investigations in the hunting-field. "It is really I who have brought it on," she said, "and I am very proud of myself. She is a darling, and he is much better than any one would give him credit for."

"I have always given him credit for being a good sort," said Barbara. "It's only that he makes more noise in being a good sort than most people. I wonder how Lord Salisbury will take it."

"Perhaps they will break it to him after church," said Caroline.

"I don't imagine that Master Bertie is coming over here to go to church," said Grafton. "He will have something better to do. Can't you ask them all to lunch, B?"

Beatrix said she must go and have a word with Mollie directly after breakfast. At this point Young George came in, rubbing his eyes, and with all the signs on him of acute fatigue. He received the news calmly and said: "I wonder what Jimmy will say.

You know he's coming over here to lunch, to talk about the show."

"The blessed infant!" said Beatrix. "He will give them his blessing, like a solemn old grandfather."

"It's rather an important thing for him, you know," said Young George seriously. "He's rather interested in the Pembertons. I can't say more than that at present."

This speech was received with whoops of delight, and Young George was embraced for having made it, but struggled free, and said: "No, but I say you know, you must be careful what you say to Jimmy. It's pretty serious with him, and I shouldn't wonder if something didn't come of it before long."

"They might have the two marriages at the same time," suggested Barbara. "Jimmy could carry Mollie's train as a page in white satin, and then step into his own place as bridegroom."

Young George expostulated at this disrespectful treatment of his friend. "Jimmy isn't a fool," he said, "and he knows it couldn't come off yet. But I'll tell you this, just to show you, though you mustn't let it go any further. He's chucked the idea of going to Oxford. He says directly he leaves Eton he must begin to make money."

"Well that shows he's in earnest," said Grafton. "I admire a fellow who can make sacrifices for the girl he loves."

The Grafton family went to church. On their way across they met the Vicar and Mrs. Mercer. The little

lady was full of smiles. "I know you must have heard our great news," she said, "for I saw Beatrix coming from Stone Cottage half an hour ago. We are so pleased about it. It's a great thing for dear Mollie, though, of course, we shall hate losing her."

The Vicar, if not all smiles like his wife, also expressed his pleasure over the affair, rather as if it had been of his own making. Beatrix had heard something of what had happened the evening before from Mollie, but by no means all. Mollie had also spoken of a note of congratulation that had come from the Vicarage that morning, so she took it that he had swallowed his chagrin, and that matters were to be on the same footing between the Vicarage and Stone Cottage as before.

The Vicar's letter, indeed, had been a masterpiece of capitulation. Going home the night before, he had seen that it was necessary to cover up his mistakes by whatever art he could summon, unless he was prepared for an open breach with the Walters, which if it came would react on his own position in a way that would make it almost impossible. In view of his behaviour towards Bertie it was not certain that this could be done, but he had at least to make his effort. He had first of all set the mind of his wife at ease by giving her a garbled account of what had taken place in the drawing-room of Stone Cottage, from which she had drawn the conclusion that he had felt it his duty to ask young Pemberton what his intentions were towards the girl whom he looked upon as being in some sense

under his protection, and that his intervention had brought about an immediate proposal of marriage. This had, of course, set his own mind at rest, and had indeed brought him considerable pleasure. She was not, however, to say a word outside about his part in the affair.

It had been enough for her to have those fears under which she had made her escape from Stone Cottage set at rest, and she had not examined too closely into the story, though she had asked a few questions as to the somewhat remarkable fact of the proposal having been made in his presence and accepted within the quarter of an hour that had elapsed between her home-coming and his. If she had known that he had left Stone Cottage within about three minutes, and had spent the rest of the time calming himself by a walk up the village street, she might have found it, in fact, still more remarkable. She was so relieved, however, at finding her husband prepared to accept Mollie's engagement, and to act in a fatherly way towards the young couple, that she rested herself upon that, and let her own pleasure in the happiness that had come to the girl she loved have its full flow.

Mrs. Mercer having been satisfied, and her mouth incidentally closed, by order, the more difficult task remained to placate Mollie and Pemberton. On thinking it over carefully, with wits sharpened by a real and increasing alarm, the Vicar had decided that neither of those two would wish an open breach, and would welcome an assumption upon which they could

avoid it. This enabled him to put a little more dignity into his letter than the facts entitled him to. He had, he wrote, entirely misjudged the situation. Nothing, naturally, could please him better than that the girl in whom he had taken so warm an interest should find happiness in a suitable marriage. He had no hesitation in saying that this struck him as an eminently suitable marriage, and he asked her to believe that he was sincere in wishing her all joy and blessing from it. Anything that he may have said in the heat of the moment to Mr. Pemberton, under the impression that his attentions had not been serious, he should wish unreservedly to apologise for. When one had made a mistake, it was the part of an honest man to acknowledge it frankly, and make an end of it. He thought that it might be more agreeable to Mr. Pemberton that this acknowledgment should be conveyed to him through Mollie. He did not, therefore, propose to write to him himself, but trusted that no more would be thought or said of what had passed.

The letter ended tentatively on the note of his old intercourse with Mollie, and the last sentences gave him more trouble than all the rest put together. He knew well enough that if his overtures were not accepted this claim to something special in the way of affection on both sides could only be contemptuously rejected, and that in any case he had no right left upon which to found it.

It was gall and bitterness to him to recall her standing up to confront him with her clear quiet eyes fixed

upon him, searching out his meanness, and of her lover with his hand resting on her shoulder to show that it was he in whom she could place her confidence to protect her against the claims of an unworthy jealousy. And he touched the bottom of the cup when he figured them reading his letter together and accepting his compact because he was not worth while their making trouble about, his sting once drawn; and not at all because they believed in its sincerity. They would know well enough why he had written it, especially in the light of his wife's ignorance of what had happened, which he would not be able to prevent her showing them. That ignorant loud-mannered young man who had to be apologised to, in such a way that he could hardly accept the apology without feeling if not showing contempt! It shook him with passion to think of his degradation before him, and of what was being given to him so beautifully and freely. There was not in his thoughts a vestige of the feeling that he would have to act before the world—of pleasure that the girl towards whom he claimed to have given nothing but protecting affection should have found her happiness in a promising love. It was all black jealousy and resentment on his own behalf, and resentment against her as well as against the man whom she had chosen for herself.

And yet by the next morning he had persuaded himself that some of those feelings which he would have to act were really his. Perhaps in some sense they were, for right feelings can be induced where the necessity

for them is recognised, and his affection for Mollie had actually included those elements which he had so steadfastly kept in the foreground. Also, his arrogance and self-satisfaction had prevented him in his bitterest moments from recognising all the baseness in himself, and gave him a poor support in thinking that, after all, his letter showed manliness and generosity, and might be accepted so. He had, at any rate, to keep up his front before the world, and by the time he met and talked to the Graftons between their house and the church his good opinion of himself had begun to revive. He was still troubled with fears as to how his overtures would be received. Mollie would have received his letter early that morning, and might have come over with her answer; but she had evidently waited to consult over it with her lover. He had prevented his wife running over to the Cottage, saying that they would meet Mollie either before or after church. And so it had to be left, with tremors and deceptions that, one would have thought, must have disturbed him greatly in the duties he would have to fulfil before his parishioners. Yet he preached a sermon about the approaching festival of the church, which denoted in his view, amongst other things, that the evil passions under which mankind had laboured since the creation of the world had in the fulness of time found their remedy, and told his hearers, with the air of one who knew what he was talking about, that there was no excuse for them if they gave way to any evil passion whatsoever, since the remedy was always to

their hand. And in this connection he wished to point out to them, as he had done constantly throughout his ministry, that the highest means of grace were there at their very doors in that place in which they were gathered together. He himself was always to be found at his post, and woe betide any of them who neglected to take advantage of what he as a priest of the church was there to give them. The sermon, delivered with his usual confidence, not to say pomposity, did him good. He felt small doubt after it of being able to control the situation in support of his own dignity, whatever attitude towards him Mollie and Bertie Pemberton should decide to adopt.

In the meantime those young lovers were spending an hour of bliss together. They talked over all that had led up to their present happy agreement, and found each other more exactly what they wanted every minute that passed. A very short time was devoted to consideration of the Vicar's letter. "Oh, tear it up and forget all about the blighter," said Bertie, handing it back to her. But there was a little more to be settled than that. Mrs. Mercer must be considered, for her own sake as well as for Mrs. Walter's. "Well then, you can say 'how do you do' to the fellow and leave it at that," said Bertie. "If he's got any decency in him he won't want to push himself, and if he does you let me know, and I'll deal with him. I'm letting him off cheap, but we don't want to bother our heads with him. You needn't answer his letter. Tear it up."

So Mollie tore it up and put it in the fire, and the

Vicar was forgotten until they met him and Mrs. Mercer on their way to the Abbey.

The meeting passed off with less awkwardness than might have been expected, as such reparatory meetings generally do, where both sides are willing to ignore the past. Mrs. Walter was with them, having been persuaded to lunch at the Abbey. The Vicar addressed himself chiefly to her, while his wife gushed happily over Mollie, and included Bertie in her address in a way which gave him a good opinion of her, and enabled him to accept the Vicar's stiff word of congratulation with one of thanks before he turned his back upon him. It was over in a very short time, and Mr. and Mrs. Mercer pursued their way homewards, the lady chattering freely, the lord holding his head on high and accepting with patronising affability the salutations of such of his parishioners as he passed on the way. He was already reinstated in his good opinion of himself, and said to his wife as they let themselves into their house: "We must think about a present for Mollie. We ought to be the first. We shall see her often, I hope, after she's married, as she won't be living very far away."

The greetings and congratulations at the Abbey were such as to reduce Mollie almost to tears of emotion, and to give Bertie a higher opinion of his new neighbours than he had had before, though his opinion of them had always been high. They were among warm personal friends, and they were Mollie's friends, knitted to her by what she had shown herself to be. As country

neighbours they would have as much to offer as any within reach of the place where these two would live out their lives, but Bertie Pemberton would never have enjoyed the fullest intimacy with them apart from Mollie. She wanted no exaltation in his eyes, but it gave him an added pride in her to see how she was valued by these people so thoroughly worth knowing, and of pleasure that they should be so ready to take him into their friendship as the chosen of their dear Mollie.

There were no guests from outside staying at the Abbey, but Worthing, Maurice Bradby and Jimmy Beckley were lunching there. Worthing's congratulations were hearty, Bradby's shy, and Jimmy's solemn and weighty. "My dear chap," he said with a tight grip of Bertie's hand, and looking straight into his eyes, "I congratulate you on taking the plunge. It's the best thing a man can do. I'm sure you've chosen well for yourself, and I don't believe you'll ever regret it."

"Thanks, old boy," said Bertie, "I hope I shall be able to say the same to you some day."

"It may be sooner than you think," said Barbara, who was a trifle annoyed with Jimmy at the moment for having given himself airs over her in these matters. "The little man is only waiting till he grows up—say in about ten years' time."

Jimmy turned a wrathful face upon her, and Young George frowned his displeasure at this tactless humour. "You're inclined to let your tongue run away with you, Barbara," said Jimmy, with great dignity. "I

need only point out that I shall be leaving school in three years, to show how absurd your speech is."

"You really do overdo it, Barbara!" expostulated Young George.

"He got a swishing last half for trying to smoke," said Barbara remorselessly. "I don't suppose he succeeded, because it would have made him sick."

Jimmy and Young George then withdrew, to concoct plans for bringing Barbara to a right sense of what was due to men of their age, and Barbara, to consolidate her victory, called out after them, "You'll find cigarettes in Dad's room, if you'd like to try again."

"Barbara darling," said Miss Waterhouse, "I don't think you should tease Jimmy so unmercifully as you do. Children of that age are apt to be sensitive."

The whole of the Pemberton family motored over in the afternoon, and Mollie's acceptance into the bosom of it left nothing to be desired in heartiness or goodwill. Old Mr. Pemberton kissed her, and said that though he'd never been more surprised in his life, he had never been more pleased. He thought that the sooner they were married the better, and he should see about getting a house ready for them the next day. Mrs. Pemberton said she had never credited Bertie with so much sense. He wasn't all that Mollie probably thought he was, but they would all be there to keep him in order if she found the task too much for her. A slight moisture of the eyes, as she warmly embraced the girl, belied the sharpness of her speech, and she talked

afterwards to Mrs. Walter in a way that showed she had already taken Mollie into a heart that was full of warmth and kindness. There was no doubt about the genuineness of the pleasure expressed by Nora, Effie and Kate, who were loud and tender at the same time, and amply supported their widespread reputation as real good sorts.

Beatrix was rather ashamed of herself for the doubts she had felt as to whether the Pemberton family would think that the heir to its dignities and estates was doing well enough for himself in marrying, as they might have put it from their standpoint and in their lingo, out of their beat. But they made it plain that their beat took in all that Mollie represented in sweet and desirable girlhood as of chief account, and were rejoiced that she should tread it with them.

Mrs. Walter was almost overcome by the suddenness of the occurrence, and the strong flood of kindness and happiness that it had set in motion. She was a woman with a meek habit of mind, which her long years of servitude had not lessened. She had accepted the insinuation that had run all through the Vicar's addresses on the subject of Mollie and Bertie Pemberton—that the Pembertons were in a social position much superior to her own, though not, as it had always been implied, to his, and that in any attentions that the young man might give to her daughter there could be no design of ultimate marriage. Her dignity had not been wounded by the presentation of the Pemberton superiority, and had only asserted itself when he had seemed to hint

that she might be anxious to bridge the gulf between them. But here were these people, whom she had been invited to look upon in that way, welcoming not only her daughter as a particular treasure that she was to be thanked for giving up to them, but including herself in their welcome. Old Mr. Pemberton told her that if she would like to live nearer to her daughter after her marriage he would find a little house for her too; and Mrs. Pemberton seemed anxious to assure her that they did not want to take Mollie away from her altogether, but wished her to share in all that the marriage would bring to them. Bertie was admirable with her. It was a sign of the rightness of his love for Mollie, which had changed him in so many respects, that he should be able to present himself to this mild faded elderly woman, to whom he would certainly not have troubled to commend himself before, as a considerate and affectionate son. He had already embarked upon a way of treating her—with a sort of protecting humour, compounded of mild chaff and little careful attentions —which gave her the sensation of being looked after and made much of in a way that no man had done since the death of her husband. So she was to be looked after for the rest of her life, not to be parted from her daughter, but to have a son given her in addition. She had begun the day with fears and tremors. She ended it in deep thankfulness, and happiness such as she had never thought would be hers again.

Bertie found opportunity for a little word alone with Beatrix in the course of the afternoon.

"Well, I've fixed it up, you see," he said, with a happy grin, "thanks to you."

"I saw you going to do it," said Beatrix. "You looked very determined. Was there much difficulty?"

"Seemed to come about quite natural somehow," he said. "But I haven't got used to my luck yet, all the same. You were right when you said I wasn't good enough for that angel."

"I don't say it now," said Beatrix. "I think you'll do very well. But she *is* an angel, and you're never to forget it."

"Not likely to," said Bertie.

CHAPTER XXV

NEWS

The whole Grafton family and Miss Waterhouse, as the Vicar had discovered through one of those channels open to Vicars who take an interest in the intimate doings of their flock, had been asked to dine at Surley Park on that Sunday evening. It was not, of course, a dinner-party, to which the Bishop might have objected, but considering the number of guests staying in the house it was near enough to give pleasure on that account to Barbara and Young George. Their view of the entertainment was satisfied by the costumes, the setting of the table, and the sparkling but decorous conversation, in which both of them were encouraged to take a due share; the Bishop's by the fact that there was no soup and the joint was cold, which might almost have justified its being regarded as Sunday supper, if one were of the religious school which considered that meal to be the fitting close of the the day; also by the presence of the Curate of the parish, taking his due refreshment of mind and body after the labours of the day.

The guests from outside were chiefly relations of Mrs. Carruthers and of the Bishop, elderly well-placed

people for the most part, not markedly ecclesiastical in their interests or conversation, though affairs of the church were not left untouched upon, out of deference to their distinguished relative. But there were one or two younger people, and among them an American bride, Lady Wargrave, who was on her first visit to England, and kept the company alive by her comments and criticisms on all that was new to her in the country of her adoption.

A matter of some interest to the Graftons was the way in which Denis Cooper had acquitted himself before the eyes of his superior officer in the religious exercises of the day. They had no particular interest in him personally, as he was not of the character to expend himself in social intercourse with his neighbours against the obstacles of his home. He and his sisters appeared regularly at all the country houses around when it was a question of some festivity to which the invitations were general, but the two ladies were not exactly popular among their neighbours, and had always hitherto kept a firm hand upon the doings of their much younger brother. They disliked his going intimately to houses at which they themselves were not made welcome, and during the two months since he had taken ostensible charge of his father's parish he had not done so. So the Graftons hardly knew him, but were interested on general grounds in the little comedy of patronage which was being enacted before their eyes. It was fresh to them, these desires and jealousies in connection with a factor of country life

which hardly shows up in a city, except in those circles in which all church affairs are of importance. All over the country are these pleasant houses and gardens and glebes, with an income larger or smaller attached to them, and a particular class of men to whom their disposal is of extreme interest. In this case there was one of the prizes involved, and they knew at least two of the candidates, for their own Vicar had made it plain enough that he was one of them, and here was the other. Here also was the authority with whom it lay to award the prize. His decision could not be foreseen, but might be guessed at, and any signs of it that might be visible under their eyes were of value.

Their sympathies inclined towards the candidature of Denis Cooper, in spite of their small acquaintance with him. It would be a sporting thing if he were to pull it off, against the handicap of his extreme youth. On the other hand, if their own Vicar should be appointed, he would be removed from the sphere of his present labours and, apart from the relief that this would afford them in itself, it would be followed by another little comedy, in which they would all take a hand themselves. For it would lay with their father to appoint a successor, and it was not to be supposed that he would undertake a task of such importance except in full consultation with themselves. On the balance, however, they were supporters of Denis Cooper, and it looked well for his chances that when they entered the morning-room of Surley Park, where the

guests were assembled, the Bishop was seen standing by the fire-place with his hand on the young man's shoulder.

Ella Carruthers found an opportunity before dinner was announced of confiding to Caroline and Beatrix that he had acquitted himself well. "Really I believe I'm going to pull it off," she said. "It's very good of me to take so much trouble about Denis because it means my saddling myself with Rhoda and Ethel, when I should so much like to get rid of them. Still, if I succeed in getting him firmly planted in the Rectory I shall set about finding him a wife, and then they'll have to go. They won't like it, and they'll make trouble, which I shall enjoy very much."

"Was the Bishop pleased with his sermons?" asked Caroline.

"He only preached one," she said. "My uncle performed in the afternoon, I think with the idea of showing him how much better he could do it himself. But of the two I liked Denis's sermon the better. It was more learned, and didn't take so long."

"Was he pleased with Denis?" asked Beatrix. "It looked like it when we came in. I believe they were telling one another funny stories."

"Oh, yes. He said he seemed an honest manly young fellow, and not too anxious to push himself."

"Was that a dig at Rhoda and Ethel, do you suppose?"

"I took it so. I said they were very tiresome in the way they tried to direct everything and everybody,

but that Denis wasn't like them at all. All the people in the place loved his old father, and liked him too."

"Do you think he took that in?"

"I hope so, though, of course, he wouldn't commit himself. I think he's sized up Rhoda and Ethel, though, for he asked me when Mrs. Cooper died, and said that he had heard that she had been a very managing woman. I say, did you know that your Lord Salisbury actually came over here to church this afternoon?"

"*Our* Lord Salisbury!" exclaimed Beatrix.

"I don't think he did any good for himself. I had to ask him to tea, as he hung about after church, and we were all walking up together. But I took care to let my uncle see that I was forced into it. He was quite friendly with him, but didn't give him the whole of his attention, as he seemed to expect. Oh, he sees into things all right, the clever old dear! I should say that Lord Salisbury's forcing himself in like that has put him out of the betting. I don't know what others there are running, but I'd stake a pair of gloves on Denis's chances, and I shall try to do a little more for him still before I've finished."

The number of guests made a general conversation round the dinner-table of infrequent occurrence, though whenever the Bishop showed signs of wishing to address the assembly he was allowed to do so, and Lady Wargrave sometimes succeeded, more by the gaiety and wit of her speech than by its high-pitched note, in making herself listened to by everybody. It was fortunate, however, for what hung upon it, that a certain con-

versation in which she bore a leading part towards the end of the meal was confined to her end of the table.

She was talking of transatlantic marriages in general, and her own in particular. "I'd like everybody to know," she said, "that I married for love. Now do tell me, Bishop, from what you can see at the other end of the table, that you think I am speaking the truth."

Lord Wargrave, at that moment in earnest conversation with a dignified-looking dowager, was good-looking enough, in a rather heavy British way, to make the claim not unreasonable, though he was by no means the equal of his wife in that respect.

"I can believe that you both fell in love with each other," said the Bishop benignly.

"Thank you," said the lady, "I hope you are not being sarcastic. Lots of our girls *do* marry for the sake of a title, and I won't say that it's not funny to be called My Lady just at first. Still it wears off after a bit, and isn't worth giving up your American citizenship for."

"Would you rather Lord Wargrave had been a plain American citizen instead of an Englishman with a title?" asked Ella.

"Why, sure! I'm telling you so."

"But you do like Englishmen, all the same," suggested the Bishop.

"I'm not going to say that I like Englishmen as much as Americans. Nothing will drag that from me, if I never set foot in the States again. But as to that,

Wargrave has promised me a trip every two years. I wouldn't have married him without, though you can see that I adore him, and I'm not ashamed of showing it."

"Well then, you like Englishmen next best to Americans."

"Perhaps I do, though I think Frenchmen are real cute. They've a way with them. With an Englishman you generally have to do more than half yourself. With a Frenchman you've got to be mighty smart to see that you get the chance of doing your half. With an Englishman, when you're once married it's finished, but I should judge that you would have to get busy and keep busy, married to a Frenchman."

Ella Carruthers stole a look at Beatrix, who was seated a few places away from her. She had been talking to her neighbour, but now sat with her eyes fixed upon the speaker. Her colour was a little heightened, but it was impossible to tell from her look what she was thinking. Ella hoped for her sake that the conversation would not be continued on that subject, and prepared her wits to divert it. But the next moment something had been said which changed her feeling from one of sympathy with Beatrix to one of sharp alarm on her behalf.

"A French Marquis came to N'York last fall," pursued Lady Wargrave, "who was the cutest thing in the way of European nobility you ever struck. He talked English like an Amurrcan, and was a poifectly lovely man to look at. One of my girl friends has just

gotten engaged to him; I had the noos from her last mail. Of course I wrote back that I was enchanted, but if he had wanted *me* there'd have been no Marquise yet awhile. But I wasn't rich enough anyway. The Frenchmen who come over are always out for the dollars, the Englishmen let them go by sometimes. Wargrave did. He could have had one of our big fortunes, if he wouldn't rather have had me."

Poor little Beatrix! She was spared the hammer-stroke of hearing her lover's name in public, but there was never any doubt in her mind that it was he. She turned dead white, and kept her eyes fixed upon Lady Wargrave until she had finished her speech and passed on lightly to some other topic. Then she turned to her neighbour and listened to something he was saying to her, but without hearing it, and she was obliged to leave off pealing the orange she held because her hands were trembling.

There happened to be nobody at that end of the table, listening to Lady Wargrave, who could connect her speech with Beatrix, except Ella Carruthers. Beatrix, when she had sat still and silent for a moment, looked at her suddenly with an appealing look, and found her eyes fixed upon her with the deepest concern. That enabled her to overcome her tremors. She would have broken down if Ella, by any word, had drawn attention to her. She suddenly turned to her neighbour and began to chatter. He was an elderly man, interested in his dinner, who had not noticed her sudden pallor. As she talked, her colour came back to

her, and she hardly left off talking until the sign was given, rather prematurely, for the ladies to leave the table. Her knees were trembling as she rose from her seat, and she was glad of Ella's arm to support her as she walked from the room.

"No," she said, in answer to a low-spoken word of going upstairs. "I don't want to. Ask if it's he—but I know it is—and tell Caroline to come and tell me."

She made her way to a sofa in a corner of the big drawing-room, and sat down, while the rest of the women clustered around the chimney-piece. She sat there waiting, without thought and without much sensation. She was conscious only of revolt against the blow that had been dealt her, and determination to support it.

Presently Caroline came to her, her soft eyes full of trouble. "My darling!" she said tenderly, sitting down by her.

"You needn't say it," she said quickly. "If he's like that I'm not going to make a scene. Pretend to talk to me, and presently I'll go and talk to the others."

She had an ardent wish to throw it all off from her, not to care, and to show that she didn't care. But her knees were trembling again, and she could not have walked across the room.

Caroline was near tears. "Oh, it's wicked—the way he has treated you," she said. "You're going to forget him, aren't you, my darling B?"

"Of course I am," said Beatrix, hurriedly. "I'll

think no more of him at all. I've got you—and Daddy —and the Dragon."

The mention of Miss Waterhouse may have been drawn from her by the approach of that lady, though she had been all the mother to her that she had ever known and she did feel at that moment that there was consolation in her love.

Miss Waterhouse did not allow her tenderness to overcome her authority, though her tenderness was apparent as she said: "Darling B, you won't be feeling well. I have asked Ella to send for the car, and I shall take you home. We will go quietly upstairs, now, before the men come in."

Beatrix protested. She was perfectly all right, and didn't want any fuss made about her. She was rather impatient, and burning to show that she didn't care. But as most of the people towards whom she would have to make the exhibition wouldn't know that she had any reason to care, it seemed hardly worth the expenditure of energy, of which, at that moment, she had none too much to spare. Also she did care, and the thought of getting away quietly and being herself, in whatever guise her feelings might prompt, was immensely soothing. So she and Miss Waterhouse slipped out of the room, and by the time the men came into it were on their way home.

It was Caroline who told her father. She had a little dreaded his first word and look. In some ways, over this affair of Beatrix's, he had not been quite as she had learnt to know him. He had lost that complete

mastery which long years of unfailing kindness and gentleness had given him over his children. He had shown annoyance and resentment, and had made complaints, which one who is firmly in authority does not do. Some weakness, under the stress of feeling, had come out in him, instead of the equable strength which his children had learnt to rely on. Perhaps Caroline loved him all the more for it, for it was to her he had come more than to any other for sympathy and support. But she did not want to have to make any further readjustments. Which of the mixed and opposing feelings would he show first, on the news being broken to him—the great relief it would bring to himself, or the sympathy he would certainly feel towards his child who had been hurt.

"Daddy darling," she said, drawing him a little aside, "B and the Dragon have gone home. She heard at dinner that Lassigny is going to be married. She's all right, but the Dragon made her go home."

His face—that of a man whom a sufficiency, but not an overplus, of food and wine and tobacco had put into just accord with the world about him—expressed little but bewilderment. "Heard at dinner!" he echoed. "Who on earth told her?"

"Lady Wargrave. She had had a letter from America."

He threw a look at that resplendent lady, whose high but not unmusical voice was riding the stream of talk. Her beautiful face and form, her graceful vivacity, and the perfection of her attire were such as naturally to

have attracted round her magnet-wise the male filings of after-dinner re-assembly. Grafton himself, casting an unattached but attachable eye round him on entering the room, would have made his way instinctively to the group in which she was sitting.

"Damn the woman!" he said vindictively.

Caroline took hold of the lapels of his coat and kissed him, in defiance of company manners. "Hush, darling! The Bishop!" she said.

Throughout the short hour that followed he was vivacious and subdued by turns. He had no more than a few words alone with his hostess. "Poor little B!" she said commiseratingly.

"Yes, poor little B!" he echoed. "Are you sure it's that fellow?"

"Oh, yes, she said so, when I asked her. I didn't tell her why I had asked. You can talk to her about it if you like."

"Oh, good Lord, no!" he said. "I don't want to hear the fellow's name again. What has happened to him is nothing to me, if we've got rid of him. Of course I'm glad of it. It shows I was right about him. Now I shall get my little girl back again."

It was the sort of speech that Caroline had vaguely feared. Ella Carruthers said, with a smile: "You can't expect to keep her long, you know. But I'm glad this is at an end, as you so much disliked it."

Going home in the car, at a comparatively early hour, because bishops are supposed to want to go to bed on Sunday evenings, they talked it over. Bunting

had heard the news from Barbara, and was inclined to take a serious view of it.

"I think it's disgraceful to throw over a girl like that," he said. "What are you going to do about it, Dad?"

"There's nothing to be done," said his father, "except to help B to forget all about him. Of course she'll be very much hurt, but when she's had time to think it over she'll see for herself that he wasn't worth what she gave him. It won't want any rubbing in. Better leave him alone altogether, and forget about him ourselves."

Caroline put out her hand, and gave his a squeeze. Barbara said: "You were quite right about him, after all, Daddy."

"Well, it looks like it," he answered. "But when somebody else has been hurt you're not going to help them get over it by saying, 'I told you so.' Poor little B has been hurt, and that's all we've got to put right at present."

"There's the show coming on," said Bunting. "That'll interest her. And Jimmy will take care not to badger her at rehearsals. He's a kind-hearted chap, and he'll understand."

"He's a pompous conceited little ass," said Barbara, in whom the remembrance of certain passages of the afternoon still rankled. "But perhaps he'll make her laugh, which will be something."

"He can be very funny when he likes," said Bunting guilelessly.

"Not half so funny as when he doesn't like," returned

Barbara. "You know, Daddy, I think B will get over it pretty soon, if we leave her alone. I believe she'd begun to like him not so much."

"You observed that, did you?" said her father. "Well, if it is so it will make it all the easier for her."

Beatrix had gone to bed when they got in. Miss Waterhouse said that she had taken it better than she had expected. She had been relieved at getting away from Surley, and the necessity to play a part, had cried a little in the car going home, but not as if she were likely to break down, and had said she didn't want to talk about it. But Caroline might go to her when she came in.

"Give her my love and a kiss," said Grafton, "and come down and talk to me afterwards. It's early yet."

CHAPTER XXVI

THE LAST

Caroline came down to him in her dressing-gown, with her fair hair hanging in a plait down her back, as she had been wont to do as a child when he had wanted her, and she had been so pleased and proud to keep him company. Latterly he had not seemed to want her quite so much. His easy life had been troubled, as it had never been before in her recollection, except after her mother's death, and then she had known, child as she was, that she had been able to give him consolation. In this so much smaller trouble she knew she had not sufficed for him. One soul, however deeply loved, cannot heal the wounds dealt to love by another, though it may assuage them. He had wanted Beatrix's love more than hers, because hers had never been in question. But there was no depth of jealousy in her true tender nature, only little ruffles on the surface. She had felt for him. If he got back to be what he wanted with Beatrix, he would be not less to her but more. And he was most of what she wanted at that time.

She sat down on the arm of his chair before the fire, and hoped he would take her on his knee, as he had always done when she had kept him company as a child.

Perhaps that was why she had prepared herself for the night before coming to him.

He gazed into the fire, and waited for her to speak. "She sent you her love," she said, her lip and her voice quivering a little with her disappointment.

He roused himself and looked up at her, catching the note of emotion, but not understanding its cause, then drew her on to his knee and kissed her. "My darling," he said, and she put her face to his neck and cried a little, but not from unhappiness.

"I'm very silly," she said, searching for the handkerchief in the pocket of his smoking-jacket, and drying her eyes with it. "There's nothing to cry about, really. She's going to be all right. I'm glad it's all over, and so will she be very soon." Then she gave a little laugh, and said: "We've had a hog of a time, haven't we, Dad?"

It was one of his own phrases, thus consecrated for use in the family on all suitable occasions. That this could be considered one was her rejection of unnecessary emotion.

"You've been very good about it, darling," he said, some sense of not having given her the place due to her love stealing upon him. "I shouldn't have got through it as well as I have, but for you."

This was balm to her. He had not yet put a question to her as to Beatrix, and she made haste to satisfy him.

"She's sorry she went against you so much," she said. "But before she knew—last night—she says she wanted you more than she had done for a long time. She

thinks now she would have come not to want him so much, even if—if this hadn't happened."

"Oh, yes, I know," he said. "I felt it, and half-hoped it might mean that, but didn't like to hope too much. You know, darling, it was more instinct with me than anything. It didn't seem to me a right—what shall I say?—a right combination—those two. When I was tackled about it—by Aunt Katherine and others—I couldn't put up much of a defence. But none of them ever made me feel any different, though I gave way. I should have hated it, always, if it had come off. I couldn't have helped myself, though I should have tried to make the best of it for B's sake. Didn't you feel it wouldn't have done?"

She was silent for a moment. She hadn't felt it, and the thought troubled her loyal mind that because she had not been able to show him that her instinct was with his, which now had proved itself to be the right one, she had failed him. "I don't think anybody saw it plainly but you, darling," she said. "I suppose we didn't know enough. It's fortunate that it has turned out as it has."

"Well, there it is," he said, after a pause. "It's lucky that it has turned out as it has. If it hadn't, although I felt what I did about it, I couldn't have done anything—shouldn't have done anything. You want to save your child, and you can't do it. You can't act, in these matters, on what your judgment tells you, unless you've got a clear reason that all the world will recognise. If you do, the whole pack's

against you, and the child you're doing it for at the head of them. Perhaps it's weakness to give way, as I did, but for the little I did manage to bring about I've gone through, as you say, a hog of a time. If I'd done more I should have lost more still, and she'd never have known that what has happened now didn't happen because of me. It's a difficult position for us fathers who love their daughters and whose love doesn't count against the other fellow's, when it comes along, even when it isn't all it ought to be. That B has been saved this time—it's a piece of luck. It makes you think a bit. You can't take it in and be glad of it all at once."

She could not follow all of this expression of the time-old problem of fatherhood, but seized upon one point of it to give him comfort. "It does count, darling," she said. "It always must, when a father has been what you have been to us."

"It hasn't counted much with B. Perhaps it will again now."

"Oh, yes, it will. It was there all the time. It will be, more than ever now. She'll see by and by what you've saved her from."

"What I tried to. Doesn't she see it now?"

She had already told him the best. Beatrix's last word had been the message of love to him, but Caroline had had to struggle for it.

"She's all upset," she said. "She can't see everything all at once. She's outraged at having been jilted; that was her word. She's indignant against him

for lowering her in her own eyes. She almost seems to hate him now."

"That's because she's angry with him. It doesn't mean that she won't feel it a lot before she's done."

"No. She's hurt and angry all round."

"Angry with me, then?"

"No, not that. And at the end—I told you—she sent you her love, and a kiss. Oh, she does love you. But you'll have to be a little careful, Dad."

"Careful, eh? She doesn't think I'm going to crow over her, does she?"

"Of course not. And I told her how sweet you'd been about it—that you only wanted to help her to forget it."

"Well, what's the trouble then?"

She hesitated a little. "It was unreasonable," she said, "but if you hadn't sent him away, this wouldn't have happened."

He was silent for a time, and she was a little alarmed. He had been much ruffled too; there were bristles to be smoothed away with him as well as with Beatrix. But she was too honest not to want to tell him everything.

He relieved her immensely by laughing. "He's what she has found him out to be," he said, "and she's well out of it. But if I hadn't done what I did, she'd have been well in it by this time. Poor darling! She's been hurt, and she wants to hit out all round. I dare say she didn't spare you, did she?"

Caroline laughed in her turn. "I didn't know any-

thing about it," she said. "I didn't know what love meant. She has told me that before, you know. Perhaps I don't know what that sort of love means, and that's why I didn't think about it quite as you did, Dad. But she asked me to forgive her for saying that, and other things, before I left her. She's very sweet, poor darling. She hates hurting anybody."

They sat silent for a time. The fire of logs wheezed and glowed in the open hearth. Round them was the deep stillness of the night and the sleeping house—that stillness of the country which brings with it a sense of security, so little likely is it to be disturbed, but also, sometimes, almost a sense of terror, if solitary nerves are on edge. To-night it was only peace that lapped them round, sitting there in full companionship and affection.

Presently Grafton said, with a sigh of relief: "Thank God it's all over. I'm only just beginning to feel it. We shall be all together again. It has spoilt a lot of the pleasure of this place."

"We've been here a year now," she said. "And we've had some very happy times. It's been better, even, than we thought it would."

"I wish we'd done it before. I think it was Aunt Mary who said once that we ought to have done it ten years ago if we had wanted to get the full benefit out of it."

"What did she mean by the full benefit?"

He thought for a moment, and then did not answer her question directly. "It's the family life that takes

hold of you," he said. "If it's a happy one nothing else counts beside it. That's what this business of B's has put in danger. Now it's over, I can see how great the danger has been."

"But you must expect her to marry some time, darling."

"I know. But the right sort of fellow. It's got to be somebody you can take in. I've thought it all over, while this has been going on, but I didn't dare to look into it too closely because this wasn't the right fellow. If she'd been in trouble, afterwards, she'd have come to me. But I shouldn't have been able to do much to mend it for her. But the right sort of marriage—I should have had my share in that. I shan't dread it, when it comes, for any of you. You'll want me to know all about your happiness. You'll want me to be with you sometimes, and you'll want to write to me often, so as to keep up. I shan't be out of it,—if you marry the right fellow."

"I can't imagine myself being happy away from you for long, Daddy," she said softly.

"Ah, that's because you don't know what it is yet, darling. Oh, you'll be happy right enough, when it comes. But you'll be thinking of me too, and there'll always be the contact—visits or letters. Without it, it would be too much—a man losing his daughter, if he loved her. That's what I've feared about B. She'd go away. Perhaps she wouldn't even take the trouble to write."

"Oh, yes, darling."

"I don't know. I couldn't tell how much I should be losing her. Oh, well, it's over now. One needn't think about it any more. She won't choose that sort of fellow again; and the right sort of fellow would want her to keep up with her father."

There was another pause, and then he said: "It's given me a lot to think about. When your children are growing up you're fairly young. Perhaps you don't value your family life as much as you might. You hardly know what they are to you. Then suddenly they're grown up, and begin to leave you. You don't feel much older, but the past, when you had them all with you, is gone. It's a big change. You've moved up a generation. If you can't be certain of having something to put in the place of what you've lost——"

He left off. She understood that, now the danger was removed, he was allowing himself to face all the troubles that he had hardly dared look into, and so getting rid of them.

"You'll never grow old, darling," she said fondly. "Not to me, at any rate. And if I ever do marry I shall always want you. At any rate, we have each other now, for a long time, I hope. If B does marry —and of course she will, some day—it isn't likely to be for some time now. And as for me, I don't feel like it at all. I'm so happy as I am."

"Darling child," he said. "What about Francis, Cara? That all over?"

"I'm a little sorry for him, Dad. He's been awfully good about it. I do like him as a friend, you know,

and it's difficult for him to keep that up, when he wants something more of me. But he writes me very nice letters, and I like writing to him too."

"That's rather dangerous, darling, if you're not going to give him what he wants."

"Is it, Daddy? Can't a man and a girl be friends—and nothing more?"

"He wants to be something more, doesn't he? You'd feel rather shocked and hurt, wouldn't you—if he wrote and told you he was going to marry somebody else."

She smiled. "I think I should feel rather relieved," she said.

"In that case," he said, after a moment's thought, "I don't suppose you ever will marry him. I've thought that, perhaps, you might after a time. I'm glad of it, darling. I've had enough lately. I want you all with me—here chiefly—for a bit longer. I don't want to think of the break-up yet awhile. We're going to enjoy Abington together, even more than we have done. It's going to be a great success now."

"I love it," she said. "I've always loved home, but this is more of a home than we have ever had. I love every day of my life here."

They talked a little longer of the pleasures they had had, and would have, in their country home, of the friends they had made in it, of the difference in outlook it had given to both of them. Caroline had seen her father alter slightly during the past year, grow simpler in his tastes, less dependent upon pleasures that had to be sought for, and, as she knew now that

he had realised himself, still more welded to the life his children made for him. She saw something of what it would be to him to lose it, and if she had felt any waverings in that matter of a marriage that seemed to promise every known factor of happiness in marriage, except the initial propulsion of love on both sides, she now relinquished them. If love should come to her some day, and all the rest should follow, she knew that her love for her father would not grow less. But at present she wanted no one but him, and her sisters and brother, and her dear Dragon. She looked forward with intense happiness to the new year that was coming to them, in the life that was so pleasant to her, yielding all sorts of delights that she had only tasted of before, and making quiet and strong the spirit within her.

And he saw the change in her a little too, during that midnight hour, in which they sat and talked together before the fire. She had based herself upon this quiet country life in a way that went beyond anything either of them had expected from it. The daily round of duties and pleasures sufficed for her. Less than Beatrix, less probably than Barbara would be, was she dependent upon the distractions which had formed part of the woof and warf of the life in which she had been brought up. How far they were from the ultimate simplicities of life perhaps neither of them suspected, influenced and supported as they were by wealth and habit. But at the roots, at least of Caroline's nature, lay the quiet acceptance of love and duty as the best

things that life could afford, and they had put forth more vigorous shoots in this kind settled country soil.

They sat on, watching the dying fire, talking sometimes, sometimes silent, loth to break up this hour of contentment and felt companionship, which held the seeds of so much more in the future. And there we must leave them for the present, looking forward.

THE END

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